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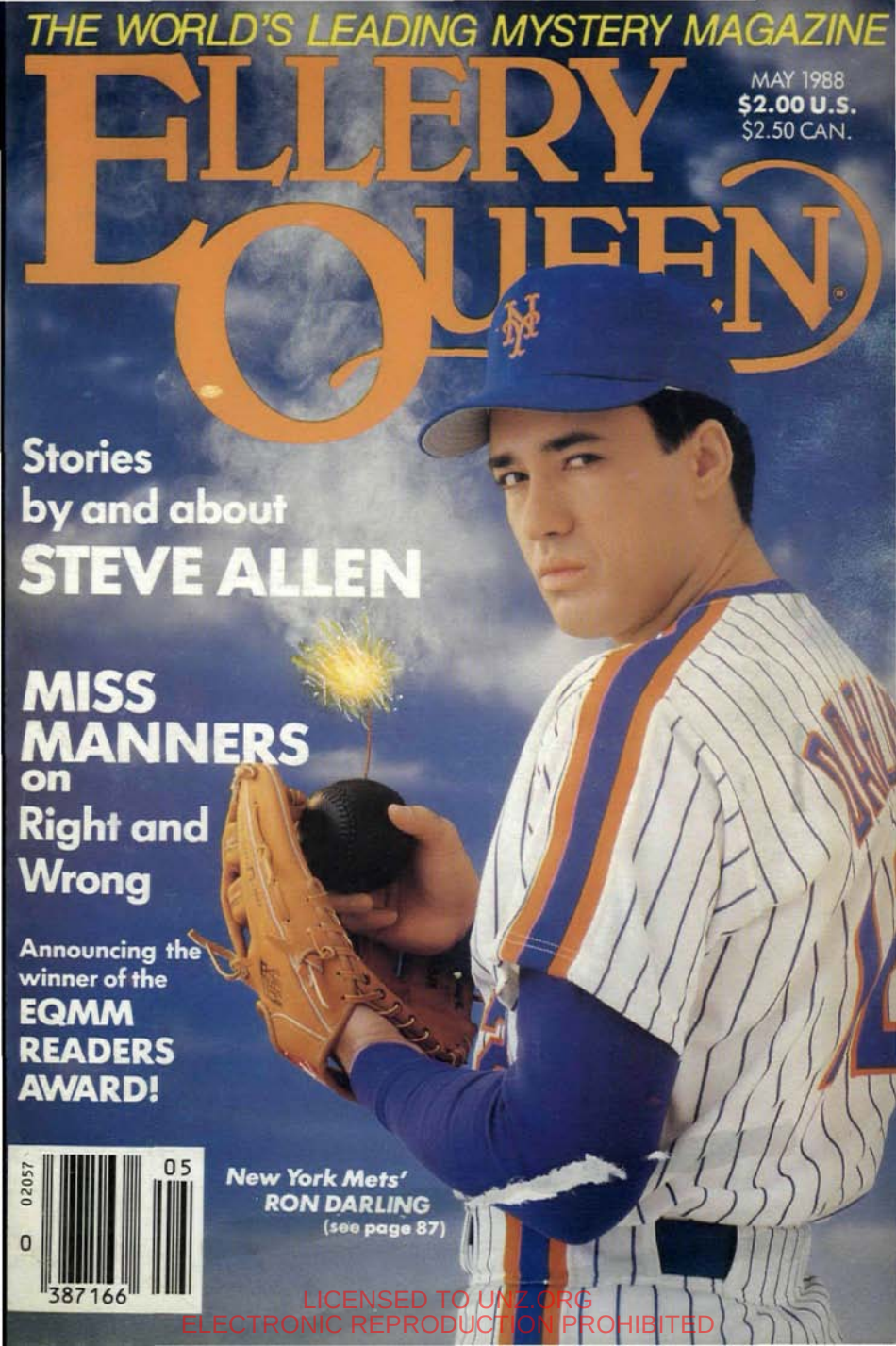

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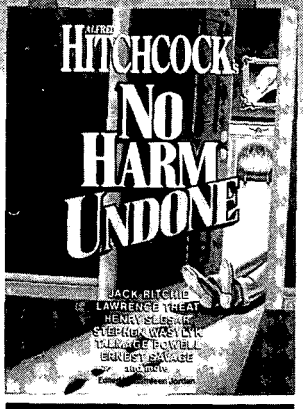

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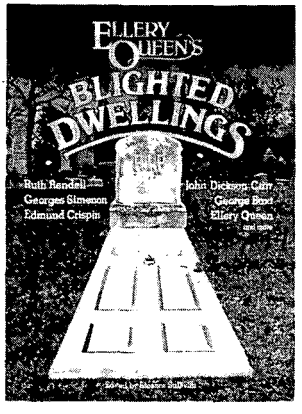

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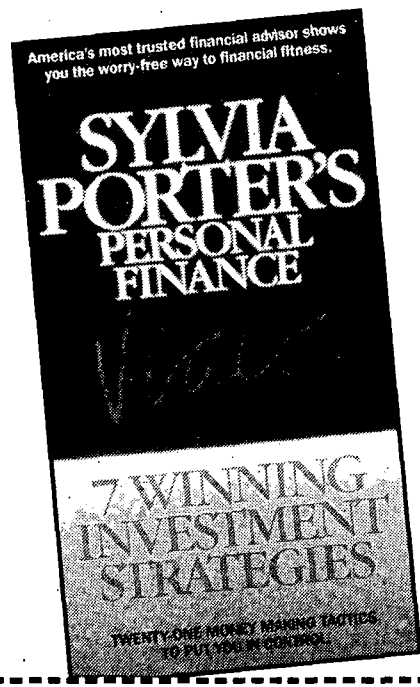
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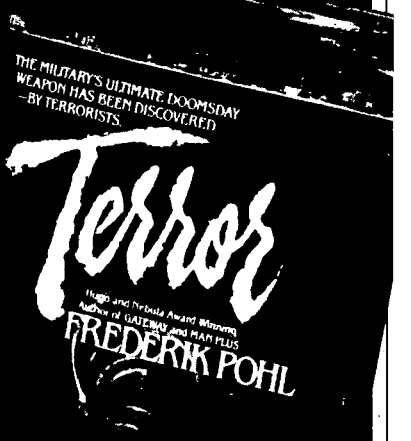
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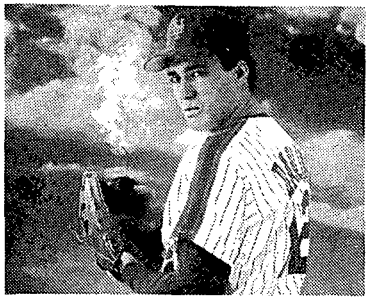

On our cover is
New York Mets pitcher
RON DARLING

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

In the May 1973 issue, we published a story by Edward D. Hoch titled "The Theft of the Circus Poster." It was Mr. Hoch's seventy-seventh EQMM story, his seventeenth about one of your very favorite rogues, Nick Velvet. Already an ingenious performance, right? Well, in the exactly fifteen years since, our most prolific contributor has published a story—occasionally more than one!—in every single issue. That's 190 issues! More than 190 more stories! (We increased our annual output from twelve to thirteen issues a year in 1979.) A stunning, stealthy accomplishment we celebrate with this 37th visit from Mr. Hoch's unsaintly Nick . . .

THE THEFT OF THE BIRTHDAY CAKE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The woman was short and blonde, about forty years old and quite attractive. She said her name was Mona Whalen and she wanted Nick to steal a birthday cake. "I hope that's not too strange a request," she said apologetically. They were seated in a bar at Newark Airport, where Nick had arranged to meet her off the plane from Atlanta.

"Believe me, I've had stranger requests," he assured her. "You know my fee?"

"Twenty-five thousand? I have a down-payment in this envelope."

"Where is this birthday cake?"

"In Atlanta."

"How soon do you need it done?"

"Tomorrow morning."

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"Tomorrow—I'm afraid that's impossible."

"You came highly recommended, Mr. Velvet. I need your services tomorrow morning. You can fly down with me today and be back home tomorrow evening." Her face relaxed into a smile. "Atlanta's lovely in the spring. The dogwoods and azaleas are still in bloom. And there's a ten-thousand-dollar bonus in it for you."

Nick called home and told Gloria he'd be gone overnight.

Mona Whalen had been right about Atlanta. It was a lovely city in early May, with colorful blossoms everywhere. She'd left her car at the airport, and as they drove along the South Expressway toward the city she explained what had to be done.

"It's a simple, round birthday cake for my husband Donald, twelve inches in diameter—two layers, with the traditional flowers and greeting on top."

"Happy Birthday, Donald?"

"That's right. At exactly nine o'clock tomorrow morning, our driver, Jason, will leave the house with it in a plain white bakery box for a cake that size. He'll be taking it to an address I don't yet have in another section of the city. You must steal the cake and substitute another one before he reaches his destination. Here's a street map of Atlanta to guide you. Our street is marked in orange—I've written the address in the margin."

Nick studied her profile as she guided the car skillfully through the Monday-afternoon rush-hour traffic. Her hair was dusty blonde, tied back in a casual ponytail that seemed a bit too youthful for her years. She wore glasses for driving and their big tinted lenses were flattering to her face. "You know, if this is a practical joke on your husband, it's an expensive one. Wouldn't your driver do it for free?"

"This is no joke, Mr. Velvet." She picked up speed as the expressway skirted the downtown area. He could see a complex of skyscraper office buildings off to the left. "That's Peachtree Center," she explained. "My husband helped build it."

"Oh?"

"Only a small part. He was just getting started in the construction business then."

"He must be a very successful man."

"Yes."

"His birthday actually is tomorrow?"

"That's right."

"How old will he be?"

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"Fifty-one." She shot him a glance. "He's quite a bit older than I am."

"Obviously."

"There's a good hotel at Peachtree Center if you'd like to stay downtown. You could rent a car there."

"Sounds like a fine idea. What sort of car will your driver have tomorrow?"

"A white Imperial. The license number is on the back of the street map."

"He'll be alone?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "I must warn you, it could be dangerous."

"What could be dangerous about stealing a birthday cake?"

"It would be best if Jason didn't know you were making the substitution."

"Leave that to me. When do I give you the cake once I've stolen it?"

"I'll phone your hotel at noon."

After she dropped him at the hotel, Nick stopped to pick up an overnight bag in a luggage shop in the lobby and at the drugstore for toothpaste, a toothbrush, and a packet of disposable razor blades before checking in. If the stores were open till six, he could get some underwear and socks after he registered.

The room he was given was high up, with a fine view of the city. He left his bag and departed almost at once, picking up the clothing items he needed and then stopping at the bakery department in one of the big stores. They were preparing to close but had a few ready-made, twelve-inch birthday cakes, without inscription, in the freezer. He bought one and waited while the clerk inscribed it, somewhat shakily, *Happy Birthday, Donald*, and packed it in a white box.

Next he went to the public library and looked up some biographical information on Donald Whalen. His birthdate was given as May 3, 1937, so the following day was indeed his fifty-first birthday—and his wife's name *was* Mona. It was his second marriage and dated from 1980. He was listed as president of Whalen Construction Corporation, he served on a half dozen boards of directors, and he was active in several civic organizations.

Nick took the cake back to his hotel room and phoned one of the cheaper rental agencies, a place he knew would have smaller, older cars, and arranged for the car rental . . .

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He was up early and had located the Whalen home in a fashionable suburb before eight o'clock. There seemed to be little activity as he drove past the circular drive and the big white colonial house set back from the street behind a low stone wall. He found a nearby street that passed through a wooded area before reaching the residential blocks, and pulled off the road among some blossoming dogwoods. He opened the trunk, extracted the jack handle, and went to work on the front left fender, banging it with the jack until it was all but touching the tire.

Then he drove carefully back to the Whalen house, parking several doors away, where he had a clear view of their driveway. At a few minutes before nine, a white Imperial emerged from the garage area behind the house and swung around in front. A tall slim man wearing a dark-blue suit and a peaked chauffeur's cap emerged from behind the wheel and went up to the front door. Mona Whalen opened it and handed him a white cake box Nick was relieved to see was practically identical to the one he had. Before she closed the door, he spotted a stocky man at her side, watching the cake's departure with a frown.

Why would anyone frown at a birthday cake? For that matter, Nick wondered not for the first time, why would anyone want to steal one?

The white limousine pulled away in the direction of Nick's car. He flattened against the front seat until the Imperial passed, then started the motor and turned around in a driveway, following at a safe distance. Not knowing the route the car would take or how long the journey would be, he realized he had to act quickly. He gradually picked up speed until he was within a car length of the other car, then, when a convenient side street appeared, he suddenly accelerated and made a sharp right turn, his left front fender clipping the rear of the Imperial.

The driver, Jason, was out of the car in an instant, glaring at Nick.

"What's the idea? You just learning to drive?"

Nick turned off the ignition and climbed out. "Sorry. You slowed down as I was making my turn."

"Like hell I did!" Jason was inspecting the damage to the limousine. "You broke the taillight!"

"I'll pay for it," Nick assured him. "We don't have to report it to the insurance company." He'd positioned himself as he spoke so he could see into the car. The cake box was on the front passenger seat.

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"One like that costs a hundred dollars," Jason grumbled. "Probably more."

Nick slipped his wallet out of his back pocket. "Look, I've got an important business engagement. Suppose I give you two hundred and you take care of it."

The chauffeur's eyes fastened on the four fifty-dollar bills. "Maybe I could do that."

Nick handed over the money and the men shook hands. "What's your name?"

"Jason Samuels."

"Is this your car?"

The man's face broke into a grin. "Hell, no, I just drive it."

"Look, could you give me a hand here, Jason? My left fender's bashed in so it'll rub against the tire when I turn the front wheels."

As Jason bent to examine the fender, Nick opened the door on the other side of the rental, shielding the cake box with his body and placing it on the ground by the door.

"You need something to hammer it out from the other side!" Jason called to him.

"Do you have a tool in your trunk?"

"Yeah."

Nick had figured an expensive car would have a trunk release. "Is there a button I can press in the glove compartment?"

"I'll do it."

"No, no—I'm right here." Nick quickly moved, with the cake to his right, and opened the passenger door of the Imperial. When he released the trunk lid, it shielded him from Jason so that he could slide the cake box from the front seat to the pavement and substitute his cake, then push the stolen cake out of sight under the car with his foot.

Jason poked his head around the trunk lid of the Imperial, frowning, then seemed to relax when he saw the cake box on the front seat. Taking a rubber-headed hammer from the trunk, he turned back to Nick's car and crouched down to deliver a couple of blows inside the fender. Nick helped by pulling at it. "Get in and turn the wheels," the chauffeur suggested. "I think it's all right now."

Nick did as he was told and Jason nodded approval.

"Thanks very much for your help," Nick told him.

"That's all right." Jason smiled.

Nick got out of the car. "Here's another twenty for your trouble," he said.

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Jason closed the trunk lid, accepted the money, and moved back to the driver's seat of the Imperial. "Thanks—you're a real gentleman."

He started the motor and Nick hoped the cake box was far enough under the car so the wheels wouldn't crush it. As the limousine drove off, Nick quickly stepped in front of the box, partly hiding it with his legs in case Jason looked back. When the Imperial was out of sight around the next corner, he picked up the box and placed it in the trunk of his rented car.

He knew he should be on his way then—the job had gone off without a hitch and he simply needed to drive off in the opposite direction—but curiosity sent him down the street in the direction the limousine had taken. He made the same turn, just in time to spot the white car turning right four blocks away. Nick speeded up, certain he'd lose the car at this distance, but when he reached the turn he saw his quarry parked about halfway down the block. He kept going past the street, catching a glimpse of Jason on his way back to the Imperial.

Nick pulled into a convenient driveway and waited out of sight, not certain Jason would retrace his same route back home. But the Imperial came back out of the street and turned back the way it had come. Apparently the delivery had been made.

Nick waited another minute and then backed his car out of the driveway and turned into the narrow street Jason had just left.

The signpost read Magnolia Drive, but there were no magnolias that Nick could see. The houses were one-story cottage-type homes built close together, and the people in the yards seemed to be older, retired types. He spotted the cake box at once, on the porch of an apparently vacant house. The shades on the windows were drawn and there was a For Sale sign in front. Next to it on one side, a white-haired man sat on his porch reading a newspaper. The house on the other side of the vacant house showed no signs of life.

Nick kept driving. He had the stolen cake, and he had no need for the one he'd substituted.

In the hotel's underground garage, he opened the trunk and took out the cake box. It had tipped on its side and when he opened the lid he saw that the buildup of heat in the trunk had combined with the tumble to separate the two layers of the cake. Trying to fit them back together, Nick found a folded piece of waxed paper between the layers. Inside the folded wrapping was a flat metal key with a num-

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ber on it—434. A locker key of some sort. Nick carefully returned it to its hiding place inside the cake, then took the hotel elevator to his room to await a call from Mona Whalen.

He didn't have to wait long. Within ten minutes the telephone rang. "Nick?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Did you get it?"

"Of course."

He heard her quick intake of breath, almost like a sob. "I must see you. Can I come up? I'm downstairs."

In a few minutes there was a knock, and when Nick opened the door he was surprised she wasn't alone. With her was the stocky man he'd observed in her doorway that morning. "This is my lawyer and friend, Bill Kelly. He's been advising me."

Nick shook the man's hand with the uneasiness he often felt in the presence of lawyers and policemen. "Pleased to meet you. Do we have a problem?"

Kelly came to the point. "Mrs. Whalen has made an error in judgment. I hope it's not too late to rectify it." Kelly was about the same age as Mona Whalen, and not bad-looking—minus fifteen or twenty pounds he might be an ideal middle-aged suitor.

Mona glanced at the white box on the bed and told Nick, "I want you to take it back."

"Back where? To Jason's limo?"

She consulted a piece of paper. "To 178 Magnolia Drive. My instructions were to leave the cake on the front porch of a vacant house at that address."

"Suppose you tell me exactly what's going on here," Nick suggested. "Why was it worth so much money to steal the cake from yourself? And why do you want it back now?"

Kelly said, "Donald Whalen has been kidnaped. Mona was following the kidnapers' instructions for delivering a ransom of two hundred thousand dollars."

"What were those instructions?"

Mona answered before Kelly could. "The money is in a suitcase at the bus station, in a locker. The locker key is between the layers of that birthday cake on the bed. Please—you must switch the cakes again before the kidnapers pick it up. Otherwise my husband may be killed."

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"But why would you hire me to steal it if you knew your action might cause the death of your husband?" Nick asked her.

"She made a terrible mistake," Bill Kelly said. "Isn't that enough for you?"

"From where I stand, it looks like she was arranging for her husband's death in a very indirect manner. If the kidnapers kill him now, she could be an accessory to the murder."

"And you could be her accomplice," Kelly said.

Nick didn't need the lawyer's words to remind him he was in this case deeper than he liked. "I steal only valueless objects," he tried to argue. "A birthday cake is one thing, two hundred thousand dollars is something else."

"I didn't ask you to steal the money," Mona Whalen reminded him, "only the cake."

"And the key to the money."

"I wasn't seeking financial gain."

"Only the death of your husband."

Bill Kelly stepped between them as the words heated up. "Please understand our position, Mr. Velvet. As soon as I learned from Mona what she'd done, I convinced her of the terrible error of it. Now we're trying to undo it."

"Please help us," Mona pleaded. "There's not a moment to be lost."

"You want me to take this cake with the key in it back to the Magnolia Drive address?"

"Correct," the lawyer said.

"My fee—"

"Mrs. Whalen was paying you a bonus already. You'll receive the rest of your fee and the bonus after you do the job."

Nick had little choice but to agree. "Go home," he told them tersely, picking up the cake box dismissively. "I'll see you there later."

He drove to Magnolia Drive, wondering if the story Mona Whalen and her attorney told him was the truth this time or just another version of a big lie. In any event, he wasn't surprised when he drove past the vacant house and saw the cake box was no longer on the porch. He parked across the street and went up to the house next door where he'd noticed no one at home earlier. Now there was a car in the driveway.

A woman in her fifties came in response to his ring. She was wearing a starched white nurse's uniform of the sort rarely seen any

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more in hospitals. "If you're selling anything—" she began, but Nick interrupted her.

"I'm interested in the house next door. How long has it been vacant?"

"Just a few weeks. The people moved back up north. You the realtor?"

"No. Did you notice anyone around there this morning?"

"I just got home from work. Ask the man in the house on the other side. His name is Gleason. He's usually on his porch reading the paper. Retired construction worker, lives on Social Security."

"Thanks," Nick said. "I will."

He strolled past the empty house to the one on the farther side. The white-haired man had exchanged the newspaper for a magazine, but he was on the porch. He glanced up as Nick approached. "What can I do for you?" he asked, standing up to greet Nick. He was probably in his late sixties and seemed in good physical shape.

"Are you Mr. Gleason?"

"That's right."

"My name is Velvet. I'm interested in the house next door."

"Thinking of buying it?"

"Maybe. Something was supposed to be delivered there for me this morning—a white box. Seen any signs of it?"

The man chewed on his lower lip. "Yeah, I think so. Tall fella wearing a peaked cap put it there a little after nine." He glanced over at the next porch. "It's gone now, though."

"Who took it?"

"Beats me. I didn't notice anybody else over there."

"Could someone be in the house?"

"I doubt it."

"You were here on the porch all the time?"

"Sure was. Going in for lunch now, though."

"You live alone, Mr. Gleason?"

The man nodded. "Since my wife passed away. I do some gardening for the neighbors. That keeps me busy."

"I think I'll look around next door."

"All right by me." He paused at the screen door. "You know, there *was* somebody. The mailman. He was a substitute, I guess. I saw him go up on the porch. I was gonna ask him about it, but he didn't have anything for me. Just passed me by."

Nick nodded. "The mailman. The semi-invisible man. Thank you, Mr. Gleason. You've been a great help."

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There was no sign of a forced entry at the vacant house next door and no letters in the mailbox. Nick went back to his car and headed for the Whalen home.

He arrived to find Mona waiting alone. "What happened to your lawyer?"

"Bill had business at his office. Were you in time?"

"No. The cake box was gone. Someone posing as a mailman may have picked it up." Nick took a seat across the coffee table from her.

"If my husband is killed—"

"Calm down, Mrs. Whalen. Suppose you tell me the whole story from the beginning, without Kelly to advise or interrupt you. First of all, when was Donald kidnaped?"

"Three nights ago. Saturday night. Once a month he plays poker with Bill Kelly and some other cronies. I usually don't wait up for him, so I didn't realize until Sunday morning that he hadn't come home." She lit a cigarette with a heavy crystal lighter.

"Go on."

"I called Bill because the poker game was at his house. He said Donald had left about two o'clock."

"Driving the Imperial?"

"No. He has a smaller car he uses when he drives himself. I waited till ten o'clock Sunday morning and by then I was frantic. It was Jason's day off, but I phoned him at home to see if he knew anything. He didn't, and I was about to call the police when the kidnaper phoned. It was a voice I'd never heard before. He said my husband would be killed unless I paid a ransom of two hundred thousand dollars in cash."

"What was your reply?"

"I said I couldn't raise that sort of money until the banks opened on Monday. He told me he'd call back yesterday morning with the final instructions and of course warned me against calling the police. The only one I called was Bill Kelly. I didn't even tell Jason when he came back to work yesterday."

"Did the kidnaper phone again?"

She nodded. "Early yesterday, before the banks opened. He wanted the money in fifties and twenties, packed in a small suitcase and left in a locker at the bus station. I was to have a birthday cake made for Donald and put the locker key between the layers. The kidnaper said he'd phone this morning to tell me where to deliver the cake."

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"Did he know this was Donald's birthday?"

"Yes, but that's no surprise. Last year we had a large party for his fiftieth birthday and it was in all the papers. Maybe that's when they started planning it."

"Any idea how many might be involved in the plot?"

She shook her head. "No. The voice on the phone is always the same. This morning he simply called to give me the address. He said it was a vacant house on Magnolia Drive and I should have the cake delivered to the porch—Donald would be released after they had the money."

"But they won't get the money, will they? Because there's no key in their cake, and probably no money in the locker."

"No!" She burst out sobbing and collapsed across the sofa. "My God, what have I done?"

"You wanted Donald dead, didn't you? This was a safe way to kill him—or, more exactly, to prod someone else into killing him."

"We had our disagreements," she admitted between sobs. "It hasn't been like a marriage lately. I thought my troubles would be over if he just didn't come back."

"Who told you about my services? Kelly?"

"No, Bill had nothing to do with it. Donald mentioned you once, said he knew someone in Florida who flew Army transports with you during the Korean War. He told me what you did for a living and it stuck in my mind."

"Why'd you change your mind about the cake so suddenly?"

"After Jason left this morning, I let the truth slip out to Bill. I thought— Well, anyway, he was horrified. His reaction brought me to my senses."

The door chimes rang and Jason appeared from somewhere in the house to answer it. Nick turned his head so the chauffeur wouldn't recognize him. Bill Kelly strode quickly through the opened front door, accompanied by a tall, red-faced man.

"What is this?" Mona asked, rising unsteadily to her feet.

"I brought Lieutenant Renaldi of the Atlanta Police with me, Mona. He's an old friend—you can trust him."

Renaldi was the sort of cop Nick had known all his life, from his boyhood days on the streets of Greenwich Village, and he knew he was being set up as a scapegoat for whatever was to happen.

Renaldi shook hands with Mona and gave her a friendly smile. "You'd better explain your presence here, Mr. Velvet," he said, turning to Nick.

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"I was hired by Mrs. Whalen to help arrange her husband's release."

"That hardly seems likely, based on what Mr. Kelly's told me. The key to the bus-station locker might have freed Mr. Whalen, but you stole it."

Mona shot the lawyer a cold look, seemingly horrified that he'd told the detective so much. "It was a mistake," she said before Nick could answer. "A misunderstanding."

Renaldi turned back to her. He was still smiling but there was a hardness about his eyes. "I can understand why you might have been distraught enough to leave the key out of the birthday cake, Mrs. Whalen, but it seems you did more than that. You flew to New York yesterday and hired this man to steal the cake. That shows a degree of premeditation. If your husband was killed by the kidnapers and we traced back the events of this morning, I'm sure your driver would remember being intercepted by Velvet here. He'd be blamed for what happened instead of you."

"My God, Bill!" Mona turned to the stocky lawyer. "I thought you cared for me! How could you tell the police everything? How could—"

"I have to be careful of my position, Mona. I could be disbarred!"

The lieutenant motioned for them to calm down. "Has there been any contact from the kidnapers since the substitute cake was delivered?"

"Nothing while I've been home," Mona said.

Renaldi's smile had disappeared and he was beginning to look grim. "They may have killed him."

"I think they'd try one more contact," Nick said. "That is, if there was a kidnaping."

"What do you mean, *if*?"

"There are two other possibilities. Mr. Whalen may have been killed by a person or persons unknown, and the whole kidnaping story might be just a coverup. Or he may be faking his own kidnaping for some personal motive."

Then everyone was talking at once and Nick decided he had to come up with a fresh idea fast. With Lieutenant Renaldi involved, it was likely he wouldn't be allowed to leave Atlanta until Donald Whalen turned up, either dead or alive.

"I think it's time an official report was filed," Renaldi decided. "Then I'm going to call in the FBI. We can stake out the bus terminal and—"

"To think this had to happen on his birthday," Mona said.

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"Birthday," Nick said.

"What?" They were staring at the sudden expression on Nick's face.

"It's his birthday. May third."

"What about it?" Kelly asked. "Does that tell you where he is?"

"I think it does," Nick said. "At least it's worth checking out. Come on!"

The house on Magnolia Drive looked the same as on Nick's previous visit. The For Sale sign was still in place and the porch was empty. Lieutenant Renaldi parked in front and he and Nick got out. Mona and Kelly were in a second unmarked police car that was waiting back at the corner.

After looking around the house, Nick led the way next door to Mr. Gleason's home. The retired man wasn't on his porch, but he came to the door promptly when Nick rang the bell. He looked at the two men and his face brightened. "I remember you," he told Nick. "You're back again."

"That's right, Mr. Gleason," Nick said. "You lied to me earlier. There was no postman."

Gleason's hand shot around to the back of his belt, moving faster than Nick had expected. But Renaldi was ready. He barreled into the white-haired man, knocking him off balance, and then they were inside the house. Renaldi scooped up the gun that clattered to the floor as Nick ran on toward the rear.

"Nothing there," he told Renaldi as the detective handcuffed Gleason's wrists behind him.

"These houses have basements." As Renaldi unhooked the transmitter from his belt and radioed the second car to move in, Nick was already opening the basement door.

There was a sharp crack and a bullet splintered the wood near his head. Renaldi shoved Gleason to the floor and drew his own gun. He ran to the basement stairway and fired once. A man at the bottom called out his surrender. When Renaldi and Nick descended, he was no one Nick had ever seen before—a middle-aged, muscular man in a T-shirt. He might have been a laborer.

Nick left him to Renaldi and hurried over to a cot where a dark-haired man was tied, gagged, and blindfolded.

"Who are you?" the kidnaped man asked when Nick removed the gag and blindfold.

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"This is Lieutenant Renaldi. My name is Nick Velvet. I was hired by your wife."

"Thank God for Mona!"

Nick didn't bother to correct him.

"What day is it?" Donald Whalen asked them as they led him upstairs.

"Tuesday, May third," Nick answered. "Happy birthday."

Later, at Renaldi's office downtown, Whalen said, "I never saw those two before. Who are they?" Though he'd insisted he didn't require medical attention, his wrists were chafed from the rope bindings and he rubbed them as he spoke.

"Two construction workers," Nick explained. "Disgruntled former employees of yours. The nurse on the other side of the empty house told me Gleason was a retired construction worker. I knew you were the president of a construction company and it seemed more than a coincidence. They seem to have decided to get back at their former boss and make some money at the same time."

"Why would they risk having the cake delivered to the house next door to their hideout?" Mona asked.

"It was easy to pick it up there. If anyone had spotted Gleason leaving the porch with the cake box, he could simply say the house was empty and it had been delivered in error. And the risk wasn't that great. The money itself was in a locker at the bus station. If the police had a stakeout, it was far more likely to be there."

Renaldi agreed. "Gleason is starting to talk now. He says they planned a diversion for the bus station—a smoke bomb to empty the place while they emptied the locker in case someone was watching. They were going to transfer the money to another locker and mail themselves the key from the bus-station mailbox. Then if they were arrested and searched on the way out they'd be clean."

"Clever," Nick said. He'd have to remember that little trick.

"How did you know where to look?" Mona asked. "It had to be something more than the construction worker."

"Oh, it was," Nick told her. "Gleason told me the postman went up on the porch, making me suspect he carried the cake box away in his mailbag. Now a postman may be invisible to some people, but Gleason certainly wouldn't be one of them. As the woman on the other side told me, he was a retired person living on Social Security. Almost everyone knows social-security checks are delivered on the third of the month, unless the third falls on a weekend. Certainly

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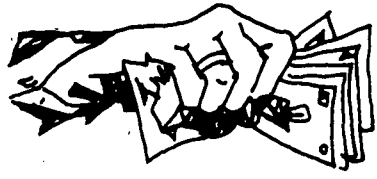
Gleason knew that, and would have been watching for his check. If the postman story was true, there were just two possibilities—it was a real postman or it was an imposter. If the postman was real, he would have brought Gleason his check, and Gleason told me he received no mail. Likewise, if it was an imposter, Gleason wasn't likely to let him walk past the house without asking about the check. Either way, Gleason's story didn't ring true—not on the third day of the month. I imagine he made up the story on the spur of the moment when I started asking about the cake box. That didn't prove Mr. Whalen was a prisoner in the basement, but it told me Gleason was probably lying."

A few hours later, Nick was on the plane back to New York. He'd have to tell Gloria what happened, and he wished he could end the story of Donald Whalen's rescue by saying that he and Mona would live happily ever after. Somehow, though, he doubted if that would be the case.



DETECTIVERSE

HOGWASH

by KEVIN GOLDSTEIN-JACKSON

His friends were agog
When Mr. Magurglar
Stole the thigh of a hog
From the house of McGog
And thus became a ham burglar!

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a timely reprint by

HENRY SLESAR

To celebrate the new Steve Allen Show *on NBC Radio, we offer you the following two reprints, the first* about *Steve Allen, the second* by *Steve Allen.*

Those too young to remember the original Tonight *show hosted by Steve Allen (alternately known as the Steve Allen Show)—before he bequeathed it to Jack Paar, and Paar bequeathed it to Johnny Carson—will find it perfectly captured here by Henry Slesar. Those not too young to remember Mr. Allen's hilarious tenure on this long-running late-night entertainment might have fun after reading "Alibi on the Steve Allen Show" recalling the names of the talented newcomers and regulars whose careers were made or enhanced by it. Remember Roger Price and his Droodles, for instance? Read on . . .*

ALIBI ON THE STEVE ALLEN SHOW

by HENRY SLESAR

The NBC page was sorry. After all, it wouldn't look right, would it? I mean, showing favoritism and all that—even to a lady with such a nice smile as Mrs. Edna Loomis. First come, first seated. That was the rule.

"It's the first time I've been down here," Mrs. Loomis said charmingly. "I've been watching the show on television for years. He's wonderful, isn't he? Steve Allen, I mean."

"Everybody likes Mr. Allen," the page replied, beaming.

"I thought it would be such a thrill—I mean, getting an aisle seat, and maybe being interviewed. You know, when he comes down into

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the audience the way he does. You see, my husband is watching tonight, and maybe my folks back in Detroit—"

"You've got a good chance," the page reassured Mrs. Loomis. "Not many people in front of you."

"I hope so," she said. Mrs. Loomis blinked at him—she was a coquettish forty—and the young man reddened and moved down the line.

When the doors opened, her determined march brought her to the aisle seat she wanted. She sat down triumphantly and watched the theater fill up. A half dozen Boy Scouts, in full regalia, took the seats directly in front of her. A woman in a velvety robe that barely covered the sleek satin bathing suit she was wearing plunked behind her, giggling with expectation. Mrs. Loomis recognized a few of the show's "regulars"—the faithful visitors who made the *Tonight* show a five-night-a-week haven.

The studio clock said five minutes past eleven. Mrs. Loomis checked her watch. George would be absorbed in the eleven o'clock news now. She pictured him slouched disgracefully into his chair, shirttail out over his creaseless trousers, sucking on the unlit dottle at the bottom of his pipe. She shuddered at the mental image and reached up to adjust the bobbing sparrow on her hat.

The sound of applause brought her eyes to the stage. The musicians were taking their places. A good-looking man with a beard, Skitch Henderson, was tinkling "Chopsticks" on the piano to the inexplicable amusement of the trumpet player. Mrs. Loomis laughed, too, but not at the antics on stage. She was thinking of George again—George and his nice "hot glass of milk," George and his unlovely snores as he dozed inevitably before the Steve Allen Show faded from the screen at one o'clock. Poor George, she thought, almost affectionately; I guess nobody really appreciates someone until after they're dead.

A man was walking around the stage with earphones on his head, trailing a long wire behind him. He was saying things hurriedly to the cameramen and making strange gestures toward the wings of the theater.

Then the show began.

Allen played something fast and elaborate on the keyboard in front of him. Mrs. Loomis joined in the applause that followed, but her thoughts were on the audience messages piled on the top of the piano. Would he read hers? She held her breath.

"Here's a note—" Allen was saying. "Frieda, Gert, and Marvin

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want to say hello." He looked owlishly at the audience. "Hello, Frieda, Gert, and Marvin." The audience tittered. A young female voice shrieked something from the balcony.

"Is that you, Marvin?" said Allen.

He had the next note in his hand before the laughter died. "Dear Mr. Allen," he read. "The Pizza Pie Bakers of America have declared this National Pizza Pie Week and have appointed Miss Adrienne Horst as America's first Miss Pizza." He peered into the audience. The girl in the bathing suit behind Mrs. Loomis giggled. "Is Miss Horst in the audience? Ah, there you are. Are you Miss Anchovy Pizza or Miss Tomato Pizza?" The clarinet player said something to Allen, who chuckled.

"Here's a note from somebody who wants to say hello to Detroit." Mrs. Loomis caught her lower lip between her teeth. "Mrs. Edna Loomis. Sorry, Mrs. Loomis. This program won't be seen in Detroit until after twelve o'clock."

The orchestra began to play and Allen moved laughingly into a beer commercial. He sipped the brew appreciatively at the end of the message and Mrs. Loomis shut her eyes, thinking of George. "Your milk's in a glass in the refrigerator," she heard herself saying again. "The carton was leaking, George. Your milk's in a glass . . . Don't forget your milk tonight, George."

Eydie Gorme was now singing a song, something slow and mournful, against a background of waterfront paraphernalia. She clutched a fishnet and wailed a melancholy blue note. A foghorn punctuated the song's conclusion, the lonely sound echoing through the darkened theater. The melody touched a trigger in Mrs. Loomis's emotions and her eyes blurred with tears as the lights returned.

Allen was introducing someone onstage, a balding comedian who drew funny pictures that meant one thing one way and something else another. She laughed heartily, shaking off the faint mist of tears in her eyes. She knew that George would be laughing, too, in that nasal guffaw of his, the spittle bubbling up through the bowl of his eternal pipe. Good lord, she thought, how did I ever feel any tenderness toward that great, snuffling beast?

Then it was twelve o'clock, time for a station break sandwiched between filmed commercials. George would be getting up now, with elephantine grace, and padding his way toward the kitchen. His pipe, lit or unlit, would be stuffed into his shirt pocket. If unlit, he would forget it there until the black ashes had smeared the shirt beyond the power of detergents. If lit, he would suddenly feel the

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heat, let out some censorable word, and slam the pipe on the kitchen sink, the ashes spraying over her clean porcelain.

Then he would spend a blank minute at the open refrigerator, looking for the milk carton. Finally he would remember about the glass, remove it, and pour the contents into a pan on the stove. He'd heat the milk, staring at it stupidly until it began to boil, then he'd pour it back into the glass, wrap his shirttail around it, and return to the television set.

He'd be sitting there now, Mrs. Loomis thought, ogling the bathing beauty now on the stage with slack-jawed admiration.

"So you're Miss Provolone?" said Steve Allen.

The girl laughed so hard she bent at the waist. "No-o!" she said. "I'm Miss *Pizza*!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon." He looked at the object on her head. "What is that, a chef's cap? I've always wanted one of those things. Is this for me?" he asked, taking the large flat box from her hands.

"That's right, Mr. Allen," she said mechanically. "This pizza pie is dedicated to you by the Pizza Bakers of America in recognition of your many kind words about pizza pies on the *Tonight* program—"

Allen peeked into the box, then snapped it shut in mock alarm. "There's a crazy anchovy in there," he said. "This whole thing must have gone to his head."

The audience applauded as the girl left the stage and the musicians divided the spoils. Mrs. Loomis's hands tightened on the clasp of her purse. He's drinking it now, she thought. He's sipping the milk this very minute.

The studio clock said 12:15. Was Allen going to remember her note? She dug into her purse, took out a small automatic pencil, scribbled a note hastily on the inside of an empty matchbook, then caught the arm of the page, who was hurrying down the aisle. It was the same young fellow she had talked to outside the studio.

"Psst!" she said. "Would you mind?" She gestured toward the stage. He looked helplessly at her, but she smiled winningly.

With a shrug, the page took the message from her and left. She sat back in her seat, satisfied that all was going as well as she could have expected.

A few minutes later, Steve Allen had Mrs. Loomis's matchbook in his hand and was speaking into the table microphone.

"I have a note from Mrs. Loomis again. Sorry, Mrs. Loomis—I

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almost forgot. Mrs. Loomis writes: 'Say hello to Detroit for me, and ask them how they like my crazy hat.' Where are you, Mrs. Loomis?"

She waved her arm wildly.

"We'll see you later, Mrs. Loomis. And I don't know about Detroit, but I think your hat is very sensible. And who knows better than I?" He picked up the lid of the cardboard box on his desk and slammed it over his head. He wore it that way for the next two minutes of the program.

Mrs. Loomis settled back contentedly. He'd promised to talk to her—he said he would. That meant everyone would see her sitting innocently in the *Tonight* audience, enjoying the show, having a good time, not for a minute aware of the tragic event occurring in her home—the gasping for breath, the clutched throat, the dreadful stomach pains. Poor George! He was so fat, so flabby! Just the kind of man to suffer a sudden coronary.

The studio clock said 12:30. The milk would be drunk by now, the bitter flavor unnoticed after boiling. He would be wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and sinking down into the plush of the armchair. He'd feel drowsy now, just as always. He really ought to go to bed—and he would, too, in a few minutes. Just a few minutes more.

The orchestra swung into some lively chords as Allen descended into the aisle of the theater.

"Let's see now." He pushed the microphone in front of a sleepy-eyed man. "And what's your name, sir?"

"Bob Listman," the man said.

"And you're from where, Mr. Listman?"

"Chicago. I'm a linotyper for the *Chicago Daily News*—"

"I see. And how long have you been typing linos?"

"About twenty years," Mr. Listman said proudly.

They exchanged some newspaper jokes and Allen signaled the usher for a group of gifts for the pleased gentleman. Then Allen started walking up the aisle, disentangling the microphone cord as he went. He almost passed Mrs. Loomis by, and her pulse quickened. But he stopped and exchanged pleasantries with the Boy Scouts in front of her. Then he shrieked in pretended horror at the bobbing bird on her hat.

"Don't tell me!" he said. "You're Mrs. Loomis."

"That's right," she smiled.

He stepped back dramatically. "There it is, Detroit. Look at it carefully. Is that a crazy hat or is that a crazy hat?" He beckoned

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the camera in for a closeup of the sparrow. On the stage, the drummer obliged with a suspenseful drum roll. At the cymbal clash, Allen said, "That's it, Detroit. Write your decisions about Mrs. Loomis's hat and send them to me, Steve Allen, care of NBC, enclosing one dollar for handling charges. I'll announce the decision in two weeks—unless I'm in Mexico City spending the money."

He put the microphone in front of Edna. "And where are you and your hat from, Mrs. Loomis?"

"Well, from Detroit originally, but we live in Brooklyn now."

"You and the hat?"

She laughed. "No. I bought the hat in New York. I meant me and my husband."

"And where is your husband right now, Mrs. Loomis?"

"He's home. Watching the show." She waved toward the camera. "Hello, George!"

"Hello, George," Steve Allen said. "Did you know your wife is out with a strange bird tonight?" He gave her the microphone again. "And what does George do when he isn't spying on you, Mrs. Loomis?"

"He used to be an automobile mechanic in Detroit until he got sick. Now he's doing clerical work here in New York."

"I see." Allen looked toward the back as the usher came trotting down the aisle. "Here's our Greek bearing gifts, Mrs. Loomis. Let's see—here's a gift certificate from the Plastico Tile Company, and that entitles you to get plastered. No! That entitles you to do your whole kitchen up in beautiful, practical Plastico plastic tiles. And here's a copy of the *Music for Tonight* album that I'm sure you'll enjoy. And here's a nice big box of Edgewood Tobacco, containing four different tobacco cuts to suit every taste. George will really like this—there's also a handsome pipe packed inside. And because you're so fond of crazy hats, Mrs. Loomis, here's Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf of Salami. You can wear it if you want to, but I think you'll have better luck if you take it home and eat it."

The audience around her applauded as she accepted the gifts and Allen moved up the aisle for his final interview of the night.

At one o'clock Steve Allen said farewell to the *Tonight* audience.

One faithful viewer didn't hear him.

He was George Loomis, who was dead.

Two detectives remained in the apartment after her husband's body had been removed to the ambulance downstairs. One of the

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detectives was youngish, with sandy hair and innocent blue eyes, and he even took off his hat while they spoke to her.

"The intern says we were much too late for oxygen, Mrs. Loomis," the older detective said sympathetically. "I'm sorry."

She sobbed drily. "Yes. I understand."

"He's been dead over an hour, you see."

"Oh, why did I have to go out tonight? she wailed. "Why did I have to leave him?"

"Where *did* you go, Mrs. Loomis?"

"I—I went to the Steve Allen Show. *Tonight*, they call it."

"Hey!" The younger man nudged the other. "Mrs. Loomis. Remember, Frank? The one with the nutty hat?"

Edna Loomis looked up vacantly, but her mind was racing. This was *really* luck!

"Yeah," said the older detective. "I thought you looked a little familiar for some reason. That's a coincidence, isn't it?"

"We saw the show up at my place," the younger man explained. "We wasn't on duty yet—you know what I mean? We were just going on duty, you know?"

"Yes, of course." She wiped her eyes and looked toward the gifts piled haphazardly on the sofa. "I never would have gone if I'd known he wasn't feeling well. He didn't say anything and he seemed perfectly all right when I left."

"Sure, Mrs. Loomis. We understand." The police detective called Frank picked up the long salami and looked at it with interest. "These things happen when you least expect them," he said. "It's a tricky business, the heart."

The younger man sat on the sofa and lit a cigarette. "That's really something, all right," he said. "A couple of hours ago you're having a good time on a TV show and then—" He shrugged philosophically, glancing at the cover of the record album. "He sure is a funny guy, that Steve Allen."

"You can come downtown tomorrow, Mrs. Loomis," the other one said. "We'll have to make out the death certificate and all that." He looked reflectively at the salami still in his hand and then at the other gifts on the sofa. "Funny."

"What?" said the younger man.

"I dunno. Something about these presents—"

Edna rose from her chair, wiping her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief. "Can I get you something?" she said brokenly. "Coffee or something?"

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"Nothing for me, thanks," said Frank.

"Me, neither."

She went into the kitchen. The milk glass, carefully washed, stood on the sink cover. She picked it up, placed it back in the cupboard, then took the pan from the stove and put it in the sink. There was a white rim around the inside of the pan. She let the hot water soak into it, then made herself a cup of instant coffee. She brought the steaming cup into the living room.

"Was there something else?" she said.

The older detective scratched his face. "Well, I dunno for sure, Mrs. Loomis. There's just one thing that keeps bothering me—"

Her throat tightened and she choked over the sip of coffee in her mouth. "What's that?" she said.

"Well—" The detective looked uncertain. "It's these here gifts," he said. "This stuff you got on the Steve Allen Show. The salami and all that."

She stared at him. "What about them?"

"Well." He picked up the salami again and thwacked it in the palm of his hand like a billy. "I see the salami here, and the record album, and there's that gift certificate for those plastic tiles. But where's the tobacco you got? I mean, I'm sure you got some tobacco. I remember on account of I smoke a pipe myself, see, and I remember saying to Phil here—"

"Oh, that," said Mrs. Loomis with a sigh. "I threw it away."

"What?"

She lowered her eyes into the cup. "I—threw it away. Why? What's so terrible?"

"What did you do that for, Mrs. Loomis?" the younger man asked slowly. "After all, your husband smokes a pipe, doesn't he? I mean, he's got all sorts of tobacco and stuff lying around here."

The cup rattled violently against the saucer and Mrs. Loomis set them on the table. "I don't know. I didn't—I didn't think, I guess. George had so much tobacco already."

"Maybe so," the older man grunted. "But it still doesn't make sense to me, Mrs. Loomis. I mean, you *knew* your husband was watching the show, didn't you? You waved to him, didn't you?"

"Yes," Mrs. Loomis said impatiently.

"Well then, you know he *saw* you get that tobacco from Steve Allen. It just doesn't seem right that you'd throw it away after that."

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Loomis said, her voice rising.

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"What difference does it make?" Hysteria crept in. "He can't smoke it now, can he?"

The older detective nodded thoughtfully. "That's just what I mean. Maybe you threw the tobacco away because you *knew* he couldn't use it."

"You're crazy!" Mrs. Loomis said.

"Maybe I am," the detective answered. "Maybe I'll look like a jerk after I get 'em to perform an autopsy, Mrs. Loomis. But this is *my* show now, understand? If everything's okay, you don't have a thing to worry about."

They went to the door.

"You'll be hearing from us, Mrs. Loomis," the older man said.

Mrs. Loomis closed the door behind the two men and walked into the living room. The television screen stared back at her, a blank, mysterious eye. It had all seemed so safe, so sure.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

SURPRISE

by LOIS MANLEY

Badly bit and bloody,
From a window in the hall—
Through the glass, out he crashed—
A thorn tree broke his fall.
He'd slipped into the darkened house,
A second-story creep—
He'd moved as quiet as a mouse
Before his frantic leap.
Later at the station, the sergeant gave a
sigh—
"Don't you know about that house?
It has a Seeing Eye."

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a timely reprint by

STEVE ALLEN

By 1945, Dave Starbuck was second in command at World-American, living in Bel Air with his fourth wife and climbing fast by reason of his shrewd and ruthless ability to manipulate men with big talent and small guts.

This story first appeared in Playboy *magazine and is one of three reprinted in EQMM between 1956 and 1964 by the ingenious, versatile, and—unlike his antagonist here—much loved Steve Allen . . .*

EVERYBODY HATES DAVID STARBUCK

by STEVE ALLEN

The police are not surprised when, in connection with a highly publicized murder that has gone unsolved, a number of people come forth to confess to the crime.

It is, on the other hand, unusual if not unknown for a man to confess to having committed a murder when beyond the shadow of a doubt a suicide rather than a killing was involved. That is why nobody paid any attention to Walt Swanson when he said he had murdered David Starbuck.

Starbuck killed himself in the bathroom of his palatial Palm Springs home on the night of September 14th. There were at least thirty people who knew that Swanson had spent that night at the bar of the Villa Loma, a spaghetti-and-rendezvous joint on the Sunset Strip.

The door of Starbuck's bathroom was locked from the inside. He had slashed his wrists, stretched out on the pink-tile floor with a

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folded bathmat under his head, and died almost peacefully. As one wag said when Swanson first confessed that *he* had cut Starbuck's wrists, although it was clearly established that he had been in Beverly Hills on the night in question, "Must have had a mighty long razor."

The police spent a little time checking Swanson's story, marked him as a psycho, and told him to get lost. I guess I'm the only one who knows that he was telling the truth after all, because I listened to the *whole* story.

To say that Starbuck was not widely admired is to win the understatement championship of any year. The movie business is never short of phonies, but Dave was the champ. He came out here in the late '30s with a reputation as a hot-shot salesman, and there was always the vague idea that he had *had* to come West, that something he had been involved in in the East had not been strictly on the up-and-up.

The idea was founded on bedrock. Dave had got into the habit of selling things he didn't own. In Hollywood, he soon found that this trick could be valuable. First he palmed himself off as a writer, sold a book he hadn't written, stole half the profits from the poor bum who did write it, wangled a share of the production arrangement, and found himself with a smash on his hands. From there on in, there was no stopping him.

By 1945, he was second in command at World-American, living in Bel Air with his fourth wife and climbing fast by reason of his shrewd and ruthless ability to manipulate men with big talent and small guts.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, as they say. Let's go back a wife or two. We never knew just who Dave was married to back East. She never made the trip. He stole his second woman from Walt Swanson.

Nobody but the old-timers remember much about Walt now, but in his time he was the greatest cameraman of them all. Some of the old stars wouldn't make a picture without him. Eventually he started directing, and he would have made a fine director except that he began belting the bottle. Charming as he was sober, he was a mean drunk. They put up with his bats for a couple of years, but eventually the word got around that hiring him for a picture meant added costs in lost shooting time. He never had a prayer after that. Well, no—he did have one chance. Dave Starbuck hired him for a picture and made a rather peculiar deal with him.

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"Walt," Dave said, "here's the arrangement. Nobody else in town will hire you because you're a stew-bum, right? Here's my offer. I'll give you your regular price for this picture and you get it the day we're through shooting, in one lump. Unless you start drinking. The first day you're drunk on the set, the money drops to fifty percent. If you pull it a second time you get twenty-five percent. Take it or leave it."

Walt took it. You have to eat.

The third week of shooting, Starbuck hired an out-of-work writer to take Walt to lunch and get him loaded. Then he came around to the set after lunch, walked up to Swanson, smiled broadly, smelled Walt's breath, and said, "Cheer up, baby. At fifty percent, you're still being overpaid." Walt's ego being what it was, he went on a week's bender. Starbuck threatened to throw him off the picture. Eventually he paid him peanuts and kicked him out.

In desperation, Walt sent his wife around to plead for a break.

"Listen, sweetie," Dave said, "what do you want from me? We made a deal."

"But, Dave," Swanson's wife said, "Walt's having a rough time. He did a good job for you, didn't he?"

Dave looked at Swanson's wife. She had good legs and was years younger than Walt.

"Listen, Myrna," he said, "doesn't it make you feel sorta cheap to have to go around town begging for handouts for a has-been like Walt? You deserve better than that. You're a looker. I happen to know you have talent. You should be acting again. Whaddaya say we forget about the deal Walt and I made? It's all over. He made his bed, let him lie in it. But let's say you have a small part in my next picture, at pretty good money. Now how's that?"

Well, when you're a former call girl, when you'd love to do a little picture work, when you're married to a man twenty years your senior, and when you married him in the first place just because you were tired and he offered someplace to rest, a pitch like Starbuck's is pretty hard to resist. To spare the painful details, within six months Myrna had left Walt and moved in with Dave.

That did it. Walt was no good after that. Never directed another picture. It must have been about that time that he first thought of killing Starbuck. He wasn't the first, of course, nor the only one, but he must have been head of the club.

The philosophers tell us that when you lust after a woman in your heart, or long to commit a murder, you're already on record, even

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if you never get to realize your ambition. On that basis, I guess quite a few of us around town are guilty of the murder of David Starbuck. But here's how Walt Swanson did it.

By 1955, he was all washed up as a director, although Alcoholics Anonymous had put him back in one physical piece for the time being. To pay for the booze, he had sold everything he had and now to keep eating he had to take any odd job he could get. An old friend eventually landed him a spot with Consolidated Film Service, a subsidiary of the Consolidated Studio that did film-exchange work. For example, when a wealthy producer wanted to go to the movies, it didn't work out that way. The movies went to him. His secretary just called the film exchange, ordered a certain picture, or maybe a double feature, and the films were shipped to the producer's home to be shown in his private projection room for his private pleasure. Walt Swanson thought it was a pretty grim joke the first time he got an order to ship a can of film to Starbuck's Bel Air pleasure-dome.

Then, one day, he learned that Starbuck had an ulcer. A snatch of conversation overheard at a restaurant and Walt's own stomach tingled in a momentary frenzy of vengeful glee. So Dave Starbuck *could* be hurt, after all, if only by his conscience, his own fears. At the time that Walt noted this fact, he didn't file it away with any conscious realization that eventually he would be able to call it out, to employ it. It was just something he heard about and was glad about, and that was that.

The catalyst was dropped into the seething caldron of his mind a year later when he read a story in the *Hollywood Reporter* about subliminal advertising. A theater in New Jersey had cut into a motion-picture film some commercial announcements that flashed on the screen too quickly to be seen consciously but, according to the theory, not too quickly to transmit to the eye and the subconscious mind an impression which subsequently would suggest action to the individual. In the test case, the action suggested was the purchase of a particular soft drink. Sales of the drink increased markedly on the night of the test.

It was after reading that story that Walt Swanson began to get even with David Starbuck. At first the idea of murder was not actually in his mind. He only wanted to hurt, to lash out, to avenge himself. The first thing he did was to print up two small cards, using white ink on black paper. One card said, *Dave Starbuck, you stink.* The other one said, *Everybody hates David Starbuck.* Then he bor-

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rowed a hand-operated movie camera from a friend, shot stills of the two cards, clipped out the film frames, put them in his wallet, and waited.

Within a week, Starbuck's secretary called to order a picture. When Walt received the shipping slip, he got the film out of the vault, set it up on spools, scissored a line, and inserted one of the still frames he had shot at home. Twenty minutes further along on the reel, he slipped in the second insert.

The picture was a comedy, but that night after running it Dave Starbuck didn't feel amused. A certain insensitivity had always been part of his makeup, but faced even subconsciously with the knowledge that he was actively disliked, and being at the same time unable to erect any of his customary defenses, he became vaguely depressed.

Swanson at first, and for a long time afterward, had no sure way of knowing how effective his attack was, but eventually he began to pick up stray bits of information that convinced him that he was striking telling blows. Column items about suddenly planned vacations, rumors about physical checkups, stories about angry blowups in conference rooms. And only Swanson knew the reason. Once a week for a whole year, he sent his invisible arrows into Starbuck's hide.

Starbuck, you're no good.
Dave, you're a heel.
Starbuck, you're sick.

And every Monday when the film would come back to the exchange, Walt would scissor out his inserts and patch up the reel, leaving no evidence.

Starbuck, your wife despises you!
David Starbuck is a jerk!
Starbuck, you are the lowest of the low.

Starbuck's irritation increased to the point where he became careless about his attitude toward his superiors, and in Hollywood no matter how high up you are you have to answer to somebody—chairman of the board, stockholders' groups. One night at a party, he told the head of his studio's New York office to go to hell. From that moment, he started to slide downhill, although at first his speed was so slow nobody was quite sure he was moving.

It was about that time that Swanson aimed his coup de grace. The next time Starbuck had a picture run off, he received this message: *Dave, why don't you kill yourself?*

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The following week it was: *Kill yourself, Dave. It's the only way out.*

Starbuck put up with eight weeks of it. Then he began to fall apart. Having no friends to sympathize with him, he went from bad to worse fast. Finally, one day he went to Palm Springs, spent all afternoon lying in the sun by his swimming pool, got drunk, went into the bathroom, locked the door, lay down on the pink-tile floor, folded the fluffy lamb's-wool bathmat under his head, slashed his wrists with a single-edged razor, and bled to death, slowly, lying still.

After it happened, Walt began drinking again. I wouldn't be telling the story now except that, as some of you may know, poor Walt got careless with a cigarette one night in the lab and burned himself up along with a hell of a lot of film. A few weeks before the end, he told me the story one night at the Villa Loma bar.

Good thing Walt didn't work in a TV film lab.

DETECTIVERSE

ONE FLEECE TOO MANY

by PHYLLIS WHITE

Mary had a little scam
And she knew how to snow—
With every dollar Mary spent
The scam was sure to grow.
But followed on the lam one day,
She heard Miranda's rule—
It made the pigeons laugh and play
To see her lose her cool.

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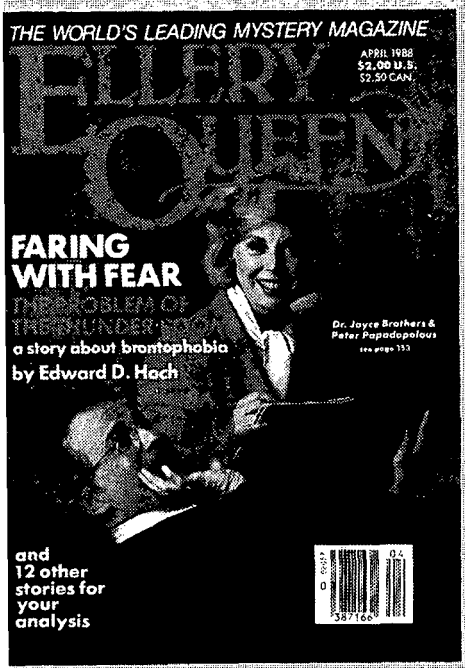

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When his pipe was lit, Lord Willard said, "When you wrote for reservations we were afraid you'd expect more of an eerie atmosphere than we can provide."

"No, this is just what we hoped for," Carl told him. "Those autumn woods—and the house is so serene. When we got here this morning, Emily said, 'I'll hate to leave . . .' "

THE ROYAL BEDCHAMBER

by ELIZABETH BYRD

"I warned you in my letter that we don't have ghosts here." Lord Willard passed the port across the dining table. "I do wish we did. My brother at Mertyn Abbey makes quite a good living off his. Tourists flock there. He serves cream teas and scone teas and holds seances at night. Now he's able to repair the chapel and put in central heating."

"I suppose he needs heat to counteract the spectral chill," Carlton Ames said, amused. "But you didn't advertise ghosts here and we're not in the market for them. We just need a quiet two days in the country where reporters can't bother us. The tour's been exhausting."

"I can imagine. We always watch you on television and I must say, Mr. Ames, you're the most extraordinary magician extant."

"Thank you. I have to keep up with Copperfield. After he made the Statue of Liberty disappear, could I do less with Westminster Abbey?"

"Ah, but it's when you attended Parliament and made the Prime Minister vanish in mid-speech that you exceeded him. And that must have taken considerable courage."

"I had emotional backup. The whole of the Labor movement was praying that her absence would be permanent."

Willard chuckled and brushed a walnut crumb from his moustache. "My wife thinks you employ mass hypnotism."

"Well—a bit more than that."

"Sorry, I shouldn't pry after trade secrets. But, about disappearing

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people—when you televise from Russia on Tuesday, shall you take a crack at Gorbachev?"

"No." Ames sipped his wine. "Even if allowed to, I wouldn't meddle. We could get someone a lot worse."

"Bloody right. Well, I must say it's all very mysterious. When this castle was built in fourteen ninety-eight you'd have been sent to the dungeon for black witchcraft. Of course, you'd have got out of the chains and escaped the guards and the mastiffs, but eventually a mob would have burned you alive."

Ames nodded. "Even now I get crank mail from people who insist that the Devil works through me."

"Handsome, fair-haired fella like you? Now me, I'd be suspect, my black eyes and forked beard. It's dyed, by the way."

"It's dim in the candlelight. I could see you better if those roses were moved a bit to the left. May I?"

"Of course."

The vase moved.

"My God! But you didn't even concentrate!"

"Oh, but I *have* been concentrating. All through that delightful dinner, those roses bothered me." He smiled. "I wanted to see a real live lord close up. Few Americans do."

Willard said, "I suppose I'm worth viewing as an ancient monument. As Prince Charles said of the nobility, we're anachronisms. *And,* I might add, an endangered species through poverty. Do you know, I had to *rent* an ermine-trimmed robe for the Coronation? That's when Hermione said we should open the castle to tourists and take in weekend guests."

"So now you have your robe."

"Yes, and a workable kitchen. It was Victorian, with one of those Belsen stoves—I mean, Belling." He pushed a cigarette box toward Ames, who took one and reached to light it from the candelabra. "All we lack for tourists is ghosts."

"Do you believe in them, Lord Willard?"

"Call me Malcolm." The Englishman replenished their glasses. "Well, I believe in my brother's veracity. He has two resident monks, seen by visitors at dusk. But as often as I've stayed at the abbey, I've never seen one—though Hermione heard chanting from the chapel. How do you feel about ghosts, Mr. Ames?"

"Call me Carl. Well, I'm determined to keep an open mind, but, like Houdini, I spent the early part of my career exposing fraudulent

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mediums. Yet for every fake or liar, there are a hundred honest people like your brother and my wife."

"Mrs. Ames has seen ghosts?"

Carl nodded. "Her grandmother, wearing a wedding gown, and Rembrandt. Emily was at the Museum of Modern Art. She and four other witnesses saw Rembrandt appear, sneer, and disappear."

Malcolm laughed and started a pipe. "I can well believe *that.*" When the pipe was lit, he said, "When you wrote for reservations we were afraid you'd expect more of an eerie atmosphere than we can provide."

"No, this is just what we'd hoped for. Those autumn woods—and the house is so serene. When we got here this morning, Emily said, 'I'll hate to leave.' "

"Good, good. We've profited, too. Your wife has given Hermione some American recipes and our cook a Genuine Hamburger lesson. Maizemeal bread we remember from Virginia." He looked across at the grandfather clock. "Perhaps it's time we joined the ladies."

Climbing the spiral stone staircase, he said, "We're so relieved that you smoke. Some of our guests don't even approve of woodfires, damn fools."

In the withdrawing room, Lady Hermione and Emily Ames sat in tapestried chairs near the fire. Carl thought they looked regal in their long, full-skirted dinner gowns. Firelight gleamed on violet velvet and rose lamé, sparkled blonde and silvery hair. Their little tables held Meissen demitasse cups.

"Hello," Hermione said. "Were you talking politics and telling bawdy jokes?"

"Of course—can't break with tradition, my dear." Her husband and Carl sat on a sofa. "Actually, we did mention Mrs. Thatcher's brief disappearance, but I forgot to tell that quip about her."

"You shouldn't," Hermione said in mock reproof. "We're Establishment, remember?" Then, to Emily: "But he *will* tell it. You must know first that the P.M. wanted to save money on hospitals, and that Mothercare is a chain of shops for young children. Go on, dear."

"Some critic observed that to have Mrs. Thatcher as head of National Health was like having Herod in charge of Mothercare."

When the laughter had subsided, Hermione said, "Isn't he naughty to repeat that? You'd think he was a *liberal.* Now, who wants more coffee, or a drink?"

They all wanted whiskey. Settled with his, Malcolm said to Her-

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mione, "I've another story that isn't naughty, but it certainly gave me a shock."

He told her about Carl's magic with the vase.

"It's rude to tamper with your host's roses," Emily teased her husband, but she knew why Malcolm had been impressed. The unexpected occurring in one's own home could be more startling than anything the faded wonder of TV could offer.

"Did you ever find your gift a bit—uncanny?" Malcolm asked.

"No. Because it began in childhood. It seemed entirely natural to me—if not to others—that with concentration of will I could make objects move. Of course, there were some clumsy experiments, and many failures."

"Fantastic," Hermione said. "You never practiced Yoga or meditated or fasted like the Indian fakirs do?"

"No. Their skills are achieved through discipline, religious ecstasy. I'm not a holy man."

Emily giggled. "You can say that again. Darling, Hermione was telling me that, old as this place is, there are no tragic legends, just romantic ones. During their honeymoon, Henry the Eighth and Anne Boleyn slept in that beautiful bed we'll have tonight."

"We had the sheets changed for you," Hermione said.

Malcolm chuckled. "But that royal visit isn't a legend, it's fact. Queen Anne sent my ancestral Willard a thank-you letter. My brother keeps it at the abbey in a vault with other treasures."

Carl said, "This entire castle is a treasure. Every room is so perfectly restored. In future advertisements, don't be so modest. You should mention the royal bedchamber and charge double for it."

Emily nodded. "And though you say gourmet food, why don't you specify grouse and pheasant and venison in season? And mention that incredible recipe file in the kitchen! Queen Victoria's handwritten directions for creamed strawberries, Albert's Ptarmigan mit Noodles, Tennyson's teacakes, and company menus dating back to Stuart times."

"Everything but Gladstone's Gallstones," Carl said, "and I'll bet he got them, too, from that twelve-course dinner. It's priceless tourist-bait. That and the Great Hall, the swan pond—"

"Everything but ghosts," Malcolm said morosely. "If only we could advertise 'haunted castle.' "

Carl smiled. "Don't you have sound effects? Hasn't anyone heard moaning, rattling chains?"

The Willards shook their heads. The wind rattled the casements,

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they said, and old beams creaked, field mice scuttered in the wainscoting, but there was nothing remotely eerie except an owl, and he wasn't dependable. "No doubt about it," Malcolm said, "we're underprivileged. Even our gamekeeper in Candlestick Cottage has a spinning wheel that hums by itself after dark and our new tenant in the millhouse hears the grind of a wheel that was removed in nineteen-fifteen. But it would be a bit lame to advertise 'Fifteenth Century castle in haunted area,' wouldn't it?"

"So lame as to be badly crippled," Hermione said. "Another drink, anyone? Tea? A snack?"

But the Ameses pleaded weariness. Malcolm guided them up to their room and said that Phelps would bring them tea at eight. Returning to Hermione, he shared a couch with her.

"No wonder they're tired," he said. "Just touring Europe for ten days, let alone performing, would do anyone in. But they're young—the *Times* said he's forty-three."

"I've been thinking," Hermione said, "how nice and tolerant he is about our ghost-needs. But clearly he's not in the least interested in the occult."

"Scientific minds aren't, and his magic must be partly that. He thinks he has an open mind about the supernatural but at heart he's a cynic—I'd say an atheist—about ghosts."

"But so kind about our need for them."

He picked up her hand and kissed it. "We're making do without them. Now, it's a fine idea to advertise the royal bed—"

Upstairs in that bed, Emily said, "It's not cold enough to pull those curtains around us. Besides, I'd feel trapped."

"Not curtains, darling—arras. And I'd guess the very ones that King Henry's gentleman-of-the-chamber swung closed before he blew out the candles."

Emily looked at the carved-oak bedside table. "That was here for sure, and the candlestick holder. Think how c-c-cold it must have been in winter—the tapestries couldn't begin to keep the wind from the rock walls. I suppose they had that fireplace going all the time."

"And heated bricks for the bed. It sure is king-size." Carl climbed in and she moved under the satin sheets to make room for him. "Did you mean to leave the bathroom light on?"

"Yes. To see our way if we need to get up." He clicked off the bed lamp. "I wonder what they wore to bed, if anything. I can't imagine Henry in a nightshirt and tasseled cap—he was far too macho."

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"Yes. —Is that the bathroom light or moonlight?"

"Pretend it's the latter. I pulled the window draperies closed."

"The room's more beautiful shadowy like this. See at the end, near the door, the glints of gold in the lion tapestries and the silver of the unicorn horns?"

"Uh huh." He pulled her toward him. "Henry would have been a rough lover."

"No preliminaries?"

"Hell, no."

"Art thou still in love with me, Sire?"

"Aye, Nan Bullen, despite that wen on thy neck."

"She—I mean, I hide it with thy diamond chokers and I thank Our Lady for the fashion of ruffs."

"Our Lady! How darest thou talk heretic rubbish?"

"Ow!"

They kissed. They heard the rise of the wind and the mourn of the owl.

They heard the door open and close.

Emily sat up. "Who—?"

Carl sat up, too. Heavy footsteps approached the bed. They saw no one.

Heart hammering, Emily said, "God! It's over on my side!" and clung close to him. Now the footsteps moved slowly to the foot of the bed. "Quick," she said, "put on the light! It's coming toward you!"

Carl reached for the bed light and clicked it on. The footsteps came close to him, then circled back to Emily's side.

"Pray, Carl."

He held her more tightly.

Her voice was a sob, muffled against his shoulder. "Our Father, Who art in heaven—deliver us from evil!"

The slow pacing continued, back and forth. Five minutes, ten. It seemed like an eternity until the footsteps receded and reached the door. They saw the door open and close. "He's gone, darling." Her body against his shook and her face was damp with sweat and tears.

He got out of bed. "There's whiskey over on the table. I'll bring—"

"Don't leave me!"

"I won't be a minute."

He poured from the decanter, brought glasses to the bed, and sat beside her. "Hey, don't gulp, it's straight." Then: "There, you'll feel better now."

She shook her head. "I'll *never* feel better. I wish this had been

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a nightmare. *They* fade, but I'll remember this for the rest of my life—if I *choose* to live."

"Ah, now, darling, you live quite happily with memories of your grandmother and seeing Rembrandt."

She turned to him, grim-faced. "But they weren't evil! How can I go on for the rest of my life knowing that— Don't you see, my whole universe is out of balance. Isn't yours?" She took another gulp of her drink. "How can you be so calm, so—smug?"

"I'm not."

"Yes you are. *Oh!*"

"What, darling?"

"*Now* I understand," she said in a sort of feline purr. "Now I know why you didn't even speak. You were afraid to spoil the illusion, your *clever* new illusion. Well, you bastard, you're not practicing on me again, I can tell you."

"Emily—"

"I suppose you couldn't quite make him materialize. It would take a Copperfield for that, wouldn't it? But you tried—oh, you *tried.*"

He placed his drink on the bedside table. "Darling—"

"I'm *not* your darling and I won't be your victim! You've been exasperating sometimes, but never cruel. I didn't think you capable of cruelty."

He put his face in his hands.

"A bit late for the chastened act."

He looked up. "I apologize. The idea came suddenly, without warning."

"Don't you lie to me! You planned this, you must have been concentrating for hours!" She extended her glass. "I want to get drunk enough to forget that I'll be sleeping with a sadistic stranger."

He refilled her glass, then resumed his place beside her.

"Stop looking so whipped, Carl. You did achieve sound effects, though I can't imagine what you had in mind for TV—to film the show in this room? The Willards would adore it. Did you discuss it with Malcolm?"

"*No!*"

"Well, such a show would be a flop, anyway, and we can't afford that, what with the competition. Yes, I said *we.* Do you think I'd leave you when you're making millions?"

He wanted to take her into his arms but was afraid to. Humbly, he said, "You can't know how much I love you. You'll never know."

Her laugh was a sneer. "Love like yours is a mystery to me. To

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think that you could *use* me for that horrible caper! But I'll stick with you. It's been an exciting life and I'm drunk enough to admit that you're an exciting lover. So I'll use you for my sexual needs. And I wouldn't deprive the twins of a father. *They* think you're God."

"You won't leave me, then?"

"No. But love you? Ha!"

An hour later, she was asleep. But Carl lay awake, aware of every sound. Under the tapestries, mice rustled like leaves. The owl cried. Dogs in the courtyard began a barking duet. Perhaps they scented a fox.

He was still awake when dawn crept in. Then he slept, only to be awakened by the swish of the window draperies. Phelps served them tea trays and Emily said, when he'd left, "Look, Carl, a rose for us both. And those charming little teapots."

Propped beside her on pillows, he said, "Yes," and poured his tea.

She turned to him. "Why, darling, you look awful! Couldn't you sleep? I'm sorry I was so bitchy. Forgive me?"

"Of course."

"I do love you. Forget what I said."

"It's all right. The dogs kept me awake, so I feel a little rocky."

"So do I, with a little hangover. I deserve it, too. Tell me, why do the most elegant British serve these cookies before breakfast? And why do they call them biscuits?"

He shrugged. "I'm not up to riddles this morning."

"Poor lamb. I'm feeling a little better. I wonder what we'll have in early-morning Moscow. A glass of tea and a pickle? I don't think I'll take my bath until after Hermione and I have our ride. She says slacks will do and her boots will fit me."

"Good," he said.

"Are you still going fishing with Malcolm?"

"I suppose so."

"Aren't they really lovely people?"

In their bedroom, pulling on jodhpurs, Hermione said, "Aren't they lovely people?"

"Wish they could stay longer. We must have them stop over with us on their way back to New York. As non-paying guests, of course."

"Let's see, they'll be back from Russia on the seventeenth. The Hunt Ball is on the twentieth and I'm sure the Adairs would love

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to have them." She scarfed her sweater and patted on cologne. "Ready, dear? I do hope Mrs. Dawson made the cornbread properly."

After breakfast, when their wives had left for the stables, Malcolm and Carl lingered over coffee in the morning room that faced the gardens.

"Do you always skip breakfast, Carl? I did, too, when I had a figger but now I need the energy. Not to preach, but so do you with that schedule ahead of you."

Carl, smoking his fifth cigarette, said, "I generally do have breakfast—but something happened last night—"

When he'd finished describing it, Malcolm said, "Great God! No wonder you're off your feed."

"I hated lying to her. We usually share everything."

"But you did absolutely right."

"I couldn't have manufactured those footsteps if I'd tried. But Emily was in such a state I knew she couldn't accept the truth—might not be able to live with it. Better separation or even divorce than the risk of suicide."

"Or a nervous breakdown. And now you feel what she'd felt—an unbalanced universe?"

"Yes. All of my previous convictions shattered in those ten or fifteen minutes. As I told you, I was so shocked I couldn't speak—I'd lost my voice through fright. If that thing had materialized, I couldn't guarantee my sanity—or hers."

"I'm so sorry. I feel responsible."

"Why should *you* be? I've heard that only psychic people can see ghosts. Emily has seen two. She may have served as a medium that attracted—whatever it was. If it was Henry the Eighth, our little charade could have encouraged him."

"Ghosts are said to return if their consciences are troubled. Perhaps he paced about in guilt of her beheading."

"I wonder if he's there every night?"

"Most definitely not. That room is often occupied. We offer it to the first guests who book reservations—no one has complained."

"Then Emily must be the catalyst." Carl smiled. "Anyway, Malcolm, you got your wish. You have an honest-to-God, heavy-booted ghost, witnessed by two sober-at-the-time adults. You can tell your tourists that nameless Americans heard Henry the Eighth circling his bed at midnight on October twelfth of this year and that he wasn't dissuaded by lamplight."

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Malcolm smiled wryly. "Sorry to profit from your distress, though."

"I'm better now. Talking about it has helped a lot."

"Do I have your permission to tell Hermione, or would you prefer not?"

"By all means, tell her—after we've left." Carl glanced over at the long oak sideboard. "Those pewter dishes keep hot, don't they? What's under the covers?"

"Porridge, grilled kidneys with mushrooms, sausage, finnan haddie, boiled eggs, cornbread, scones, and toast."

"I think that'll do me." Carl rose. "May I get you something more while I'm at it?"

"I quite fancy that cornbread with heather honey. With luck we'll bring in a salmon for lunch—if you're up to fishing?"

"I'm up to almost anything."

"Anything we can bring you back from Moscow?" Carl asked as they prepared to drive off at dusk.

"Just yourselves safely back," Hermione said. "Now remember, you'll be with us for a week starting on the eighteenth."

"I'll bring my ballgown," Emily said.

Malcolm grinned. "Back in the clutches of capitalism."

"And the royal bedchamber awaits you," Hermione said.

"I'd hoped for that," Emily said, kissing her goodbye. "It's our favorite room."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

GEORGE BAXT

"There are rattlesnakes up there in Kent," Angela's new best friend, Marianne Boyack, warned her.

"Not on my side of the river."

"You're so sure? Snakes can swim. They could come over on rafts."

"Marianne, if you're trying to be funny—"

The latest hoot from George Baxt, prince of dark farce, who in his hilarious fiction manages to get away with a great deal of murder, and more . . .

A FOOL AND HIS MONEY

by GEORGE BAXT

It was one of those rare weeks in New York when a French movie opened that didn't star Gerard Depardieu. It was an important week in the life of Angela Struthers. She had made a decision. Decisions didn't come easily to Angela. When her husband had died early in January, for instance, their friends and relatives thought she'd never get around to burying him—she couldn't decide on the coffin in which he would be buried. Pine? Oak? Or perhaps teakwood. When she was told coffins didn't come in teakwood, she frowned and hummed "You Better Go Now."

But then there was the matter of what he should wear. Mervyn (at this point her very late husband) had been a spiffy dresser—meticulous to the point of driving her to thoughts of murder. The right tie had to go with the right shirt and be a perfect match for the right suit, and God forbid the shoes and socks weren't correctly chosen. It was ironic he died such a messy death. He had fallen under a train.

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Yes, Angela Struthers had made a decision. She was going to buy that wonderful little house in Kent, Connecticut. She would leave New York City forever—the noise, the filthy streets, the beggars who used to ask for a nickel but now asked for (nay, demanded ominously) anything from a quarter to a dollar to a subway token, the homeless camping out on sidewalks and in parks, the noxious fumes of gasoline, and neighbors in the warm months barbecuing on their terraces something that smelled like old shoes and unwashed underwear. And the very idea of raising the house admission prices to movies to seven dollars. *Seven dollars!* She could rent three cassettes for her VCR for that price and still get a dollar in change.

"Goodbye to senior citizens blocking the aisles in supermarkets," she told her latest best friend, Marianne Boyack, a certified neurotic who had driven two psychiatrists to suicide and one to a monastery. (He had thanked her kindly for the lift and then fled behind the walls, where he became a whiz at baking soda bread, fermenting peppermint wine, and organizing an occasional bacchanal.) "Goodbye to cheeky doormen, to window washers who never show up—"

Marianne said, "You'll go berserk. The silence will drive you wild."

"What silence?" asked Angela.

"The silence of Connecticut. You'll be all alone in that great big house. Your husband is dead and I'm sorry. Are you?"

"Really, Marianne. He did leave me quite wealthy, bless him."

"And the deer."

"I adore ruminants."

"They're cute in Disney cartoons, Angela, but in reality they're quite treacherous. They carry ticks, and ticks are dangerous. They can give you a fatal fever. Have you ever had a fatal fever?"

"I suppose not. I'm still here."

"That could be God's oversight. There are rattlesnakes up there in Kent."

"Not on my side of the river."

"You're so sure? Snakes can swim. They could come over on rafts."

"Marianne, if you're trying to be funny—"

"I'm never funny. You know that. You're all alone, Angela—your children are grown, they've moved away. Do you ever hear from them?"

"Rarely. Irving still doesn't know how to write and I never taught Mavis how to dial."

"A dog-house designer and a female mud-wrestler. Do you ever wonder how come they turned out that way?"

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"Just lucky, I guess."

A month after that uncomfortable luncheon with her former latest best friend, Angela stood in the driveway of her new home in Connecticut and admired the view. She could see the hills and the meadows, and she had seven glorious, isolated acres all to herself. She'd been in residence but four days and had managed to get the heating adjusted (they still couldn't locate that weird whistling in her bedroom, but what the hell) and the air-conditioners cleaned (they promised her the clanging would stop if she didn't set it lower than eighty degrees).

And the deer! The dear, dear deer! There was a mama deer and a papa deer and two little fawns, and the four of them attacked her freshly laid greensward like cud-chewing epicures. "They're destroying your lawns!" the landscaper wailed.

"But they're so adorable," Angela said, and the landscaper slunk away, harboring private thoughts of what he could accomplish when the hunting season came around.

"My house! My house! My wonderful house!" she shouted to the sky. "Now I can write my book! My wonderful book about a Rumanian nymphomaniac who makes it big as a television anchorwoman and defects to the Russians! There will be autograph parties and book tours and a twelve-hour special on television starring Joan Collins and Gerald McRainey—"

"Hello, Missus."

Angela gasped. She turned and saw what she at first thought was Arnold Schwarzenegger. The man was big and beefy and under his arm he carried a worn leather briefcase. "You frightened me," Angela told him. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm your neighbor, Missus." His smile displayed several missing upper front teeth—undoubtedly due, Angela later thought, to stripping bark from the trees. He took the briefcase from under his arm and held out his right hand. "I'm Artie Webber. I live there a piece—" he indicated vaguely to the north "—with my mama and papa and my sisters and brothers. I do odd jobs for everybody. I can fix anything and I can paint your house and mow your lawn—I can do just about anything except go around the world, because I don't have the money. You want to see my travel folders? Huh, you wanna?" Uninvited, he settled onto the lawn on his knees and opened the briefcase.

Angela was thinking, He's not a man and he's not a boy. Physi-

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cally, she took him to be in his late thirties or early forties, but when he spoke she took him to be nine or ten years old. And then it came to her. He reminded her of Lennie, John Steinbeck's tragic creation in *Of Mice and Men*. Gently and tenderly he lay before her on the grass a series of travel folders. She hunkered down across from him and tried to look interested. All she could muster was the sort of expression she usually reserved for chicken gizzards.

"This here's Ireland and this one's Greece—and, look, here's India! Ain't India great?"

"My, my."

"And this here's Tibet. It wasn't easy getting Tibet, but I wrote the travel agency a very mean letter and so here's Tibet."

Angela suppressed a shudder. She could imagine that misspelled letter, with grease stains or even bloodstains, in the trembling hands of some incompetent travel agent torn between complying with its demand or calling in the F.B.I. Then she saw a new expression on Artie's face and she was sympathetic to this boy-man living with his mama and papa and his sisters and brothers in some hovel hidden behind the trees and shrubbery up Hobble Lane, lonely and frustrated, his dream of becoming a world traveler never to be realized. Then she was surprised. She had this urge to hug him.

She said, "I've got a few things you can do for me, Artie. Why, you're a godsend."

"I am? What's a godsend?"

"Oh, something or someone you need pretty badly to help you out but you think there's little chance of one showing up but then here you are."

Artie beamed his remaining teeth at her.

That was how it began. She kept him busy with odd jobs and he was happy to accept the few dollars she paid him. Miss Spellman in the bank told her not to spoil Artie for everyone else, and from the tone of Miss Spellman's voice Angela decided she'd better toe the line or end up as the sacrifice at the next witches' sabbath.

After a while, Artie seemed to be in attendance seven days a week. And Angela was surprised to find that she didn't mind at all. While he puttered about, sometimes doing something useful, she went to work with a vengeance on her novel. Some days she did a thousand words, some days five thousand words. The book was adding up, and she knew it was going to be a big one—a blockbuster.

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Soon she took to fixing lunch for Artie, and then snacks. On a few occasions, he stayed for dinner.

"Shouldn't you tell your mother you're staying for dinner?" she asked the first time.

"No. I won't be missed." That statement tugged at Angela's heartstrings.

His collection of travel folders was increasing by the week. He had folders for countries Angela was positive missionaries hadn't heard of. Sometimes at sundown, when Angela settled on the screened-in back porch with a double vodka martini and he drank a beer from the can, she listened while he read to her from one of the brochures. He read slowly but well. She wondered how much schooling he'd had. Perhaps he still belonged in school. Well, if he did, just about everyone in the village knew where he spent most of his days and where to find him.

She wondered about his invisible family she'd never seen and wondered if they were curious about her. Everybody else was. They called her "that woman in the meadow." She'd recently learned that her grounds had once been a cow pasture. Now it was a deer pasture. The place was becoming infested with them.

"Artie, have you any idea how to get rid of the deer?" she asked him one evening.

"Sure. Poison them. You can't shoot them. It's not the season. But you can poison them. We got weed killer in the shack and I could spread it around and—"

"Stop! I can't stand the thought—it's inhumane!"

"What's in hu*mane*?"

"That means it's not kind."

Artie shrugged. "When something's bothering you, you've got to get rid of it, don't you? Like if you had fleas or a rash, you'd get rid of it, right?"

"But not with weed killer, Artie. I'd see a doctor."

"I ain't heard of no doctors what can get rid of deer."

It was a very hot summer. Angela kept Artie supplied with lemonade, orangeade, and an occasional beer. The book was going well. Except for that one day when Artie brought a portable radio and blasted her with rock and roll.

"Artie!" she shouted. "Artie, stop that noise!"

"Why?" he asked. There was a strange look on his face, one she had never seen before.

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"It disturbs my writing. I can't think. I can't stand noise." The look was still on his face, but there was no turning back. He had to be made to understand. "You see, Artie, I'm writing a book."

"I know that."

"I know you do, but you have to understand. It's very hard work. I have to think a lot—I have to concentrate when I'm writing. And I can't do that when there's noise."

"You don't mind the lawn mower."

"That's a different kind of noise. As a matter of fact, it's sort of soothing. Rock and roll isn't."

The look was still on his face.

"You do understand how important my book is to me, don't you?" He said nothing. "It could make me rich and famous, Artie."

"How rich?"

"*Very* rich, if the book is successful."

"Rich enough to go around the world?"

"Rich enough to go around twice."

The look was replaced. Artie favored her with his missing teeth. He had a charming smile that brought dimples to his cheeks. "*Twice* around the world! How about that?" He never brought the radio again.

Progress continued on the book. One weekend Angela invited Nelson Singleton up from New York. Singleton was a literary agent, an old chum of her departed husband. Singleton used to make passes at her, but that was years ago when she and Mervyn were first keeping company. Now, thirty-five years later, Singleton's passes were limited to second helpings of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. His first night at the house, over coffee and brandy in the living room, Singleton asked Angela, "Aren't you bothered by peeping Toms?"

"Don't be silly, Nelson. I don't have peeping Toms out here."

"You've got one now." With his thumb he indicated the window next to the fireplace.

Angela looked and laughed. "That's Artie, my handyman. He's keeping a protective eye on me." She shouted to Artie, "It's all right, Artie! Mr. Singleton's an old friend of mine!" Artie lumbered away. "I think Artie's jealous. He's very possessive of me." She told Nelson all she knew about her faithful retainer.

Singleton said, "You sure he's not dangerous?"

"You mean homicidal dangerous, that sort of thing? Lonely woman

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living alone in an isolated house? The sort of rot public television imports from England and tries to convince viewers it's art?"

"Those things do happen."

"Artie's harmless. He's been working for me for almost a year now." She thought for a moment. "Of course, there's the thing with the deer." Nelson waited. "Artie offered to use weed killer to get rid of them. Of course, I was appalled by the idea and told him so. Well, they disappeared, anyway."

"What's in that briefcase he's carrying? Studying law?"

Angela laughed. "It holds his travel folders. He has hundreds of travel folders. He has this dream of going around the world. I think he's hoping my book, if it's ever printed, will make a few million and I'll give him the wherewithal to do it."

"When do I get to read your manuscript?"

"When it's finished—Oh, dear, he's back at the window. I'd better go out and talk to him."

Artie stood clenching the briefcase in front of him. Angela explained it wasn't polite to look in people's windows. She also told him Singleton was an old friend and was going to help get her book published.

"Can he do that?"

Angela assured him he could, if he liked her book.

"He'll like the book," Artie said.

Angela didn't like the tone in his voice.

A year later, when the book was published to poor notices and almost nonexistent sales, Angela took it philosophically, and like the good sport she'd always been she returned to the typewriter and began another novel. Artie was inconsolable and for a while took to kicking dogs in the village.

The deer never returned but the nuisance was replaced. One morning Angela awoke to the blaring of a radio. Angrily, she opened the window and shouted, "Artie! Turn that off! Artie! Do you hear me?"

"It ain't me!" shouted Artie from the tool shack. "It's them what's settled in across the road!"

"Who's across the road?"

"Them squatters! They're in the field across the road. They've set up tents. It's them what's making the noise!"

Angela dressed and went to investigate the squatters—at least a half dozen of them. They had three motorcycles and two tents and they were walking around half naked. Four men and two girls.

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Angela decided they hadn't heard of soap. The noise emanated from a portable radio.

Bravely, Angela confronted them. "Do you have permission to set up camp here?"

"Who wants to know?" asked a man who was apparently their ringleader.

"I own the land and the house across the road."

"Then you better get back to it," he said rudely. Then he looked past her and Angela turned around. Artie was there, holding a pitchfork. The look that disturbed her was back on his face. She was afraid there would be trouble and Artie was outnumbered. She went to him and took him by the arm, leading him away. "It's all right, Artie. I'll call the police."

An hour later, thanks to the police, the squatters were gone and it was peaceful again.

But later that afternoon, the three motorcycles came tearing up the driveway, parked, and the six riders waited for Angela to emerge from the house.

Artie appeared as Angela stepped onto the brick porch.

"Hey, lady," shouted the ringleader, "we just wanted you to know we rented the meadow behind your land from one of your neighbors, and we'll make all the damn noise we want to! And if you get the cops on us again, we'll give you and your boy friend something to worry about!" With a cacophonous roar, they disappeared.

"Monsters!" shouted Angela in their wake. "*Beasts!* Oh, Artie, I'd give a million dollars to be rid of them!"

She called the police, but there was nothing they could do now except caution the invaders. Angela fretted and wept and Artie meditated.

The next morning, it was strangely quiet. Then, midmorning, Angela heard the sound of police cars and ambulances tearing back and forth on Hobble Lane. A police car came up her drive and she recognized the sheriff, Lew Fielder, at the wheel. "What's going on, Lew? What's happened?"

"Pretty grisly doings up at the Webbers' place."

"Nothing's happened to Artie!"

"No, it's not the Webbers. It's those squatters they rented the space to. They're dead. Seems like there was poison in their whiskey. State police think it was probably weed killer. These crazy motor-

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cycle gangs, they'll drink anything. Well, I just stopped by to let you know in case you were worrying."

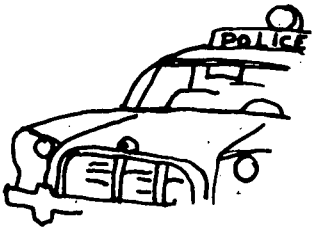
"Thanks," Angela said in a weak voice, "I appreciate it."

She went back into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of black coffee. After a while, she heard the doorbell. She went to the front door, opened it, and there stood Artie, smiling from ear to ear. He was wearing his one good suit and his shoes were polished. He was carrying a battered suitcase and his briefcase.

"Well, I'm off, Mrs. Struthers," he said.

Angela didn't recognize her voice when she spoke. "Off? Where to?"

"I'm going around the world, Missus! So can I have the million dollars, please?"



DETECTIVERSE

BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY

by RUBY HORANSKY

A foolish old heiress from Spence
Said, "To hide my good jewels makes no sense.
They really look best
When displayed on my chest—"
So now they are owned by a fence.

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Lou Harris and Ben Sherman, County Coroner and Homicide Chief, hashing over the evidence in a weird and difficult case over a friendly game of golf. A detective short short of the type popularized by Ellery Queen himself, by Louis J. Mayo, EQMM first story author #655, a Manhattan dentist with many divergent interests, including dentistry, mysteries—and golf . . .

THE NEAREST MISSING PERSON

by LOUIS J. MAYO

Whack! "Fore!"

"You have a great slice, Doc."

That line was Ben Sherman's favorite joke, but Lou Harris didn't mind. He and Ben were old friends. They'd met at the University of Pennsylvania over ten years earlier when Lou had tripped over a carton in Criminal Psychology class on Ben Sherman's first teaching day and broken his leg. Although Ben was eight years older than Lou, both looked to be in their thirties. In fact, except for Ben's drooping moustache, the two men looked physically enough alike to be mistaken for brothers. They teamed up well on the golf course, on the tennis court, in Doc's sailboat—and as Homicide Chief and County Coroner.

Doc knew what was on Ben's mind today. A new murder that—until it was solved—would stay on his mind while he was asleep, drinking his morning coffee, commuting to the office, eating the meatloaf he ordered every day for lunch, even through social conversation, or as much of it as he could muster. The golf game had been his idea—an excuse to jostle the uneven pieces around with Lou in the hope of coming up with one more theory, hopefully

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one that would check out. If it did, he could catch a decent night's sleep until he encountered his next less-than-routine case.

Doc himself didn't really want to be on the golf course. There were far too many bodies waiting for autopsy. But the sun was shining, there were only so many good days left of fall, and this was business, too, after all. If Ben wanted you on the golf course, you grabbed your clubs. Everybody knew that Ben worked twenty-four hours a day, so you didn't complain if Ben decided to work with a four-iron in his hands.

It sometimes took Ben a while to open the subject, so Doc didn't wait for him to start. "What's bothering you, Ben?" he said.

Ben frowned. "What's bothering me? I haven't teed off yet, that's what's bothering me."

He lined up his shot and smashed the ball straight down the fairway just short of the green. His natural frown took a slightly upward turn as he watched its arching flight across the sky.

"It's the Sneda Woods case, isn't it?" Lou prompted later as they climbed into the golf cart to go in search of his sliced ball. "The headless body they found in the Sneda Woods last week. From the autopsy, I figured whoever did it was some kind of psychopath, maybe a repeat performer."

Ben shook his head. "We're not dealing with a serial or psychopathic murderer here, Doc. This was well planned and executed. A coldhearted killing with a strong, clear motivation." He went silent again.

Doc bounced his shot to the middle of the course between the two sand traps, which gave him a clear shot to the hole. The game was easy compared to this murder of Ben's. A skeleton, middle-aged male, nearly decomposed, no clothes, headless and missing the top three vertebrae, five-eight to six feet.

"Why do you think the hands were burned in nitric acid?" Ben asked.

"Probably for the same reason the head was removed—to hamper identification. No luck with Missing Persons?" He knew the problems with that and said it just to bounce the ball back into Ben's court, to distract him even more from his golf game.

"Doc, we have over two hundred missing persons who answer John Doe's description in this state alone. Not to mention fugitives, aliens,

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and loners. The nearest missing person lived twenty miles from the murder scene."

Doc overshot the ball, putting it in the rough, and Ben walked over to his ball for a long putt, pushing it just short of the hole. One stroke later and it was in.

"Ben," Lou said, "someone who hampers the I.D. of his victim is afraid that the victim's identity will lead straight to him. Find the I.D. of the victim and you'll find your murderer. Chances are your John Doe is the nearest missing person."

"No way, Doc. The nearest missing person, whose name is Blake, by the way, got on a cruise ship which made a stop in Bermuda—where he was last seen."

"It's not possible he never got on board?"

"The cabin steward and other passengers saw him get off in Bermuda."

"Maybe he flew back."

"Oh, sure—just in time for his own murder. Besides, his name isn't on any plane manifests."

Doc Harris was only half listening. He was thinking about John Doe's autopsy report and his ball in the rough.

One chop with a five-iron, and when the flying grass settled down the ball bounced neatly on the green. Easy putts made Lou happy. Clearer in the head.

"Ben, didn't we conclude the victim was a dentist?"

"You and your department concluded that. But just because a guy has some silver-powder remnants under his nails it doesn't make him a dentist. A dentist, a jeweler, a silversmith, a photographer, a plumber—they all work with silver." Ben could tie loose clues together, but no one ever accused him of jumping to conclusions.

"Ben," Doc replied, "he was a dentist. He had elevated mercury exposure as well."

"So maybe he liked swordfish. Your nearest missing person—Blake—wasn't a dentist. He was an accountant." Ben meant to shoot down Doc's theory quickly. But out of honesty he added, "His *brother* was a dentist."

Doc Harris, leaning over his putt, was startled by the information and straightened up. "His brother? Blake? Doctor Warren Blake?" Doc knew Warren Blake. It always bugged Doc if the shoptalk between Ben and him connected to someone he knew. It was a coroner's

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nightmare to see a friend in a professional capacity. "He must feel terrible, his brother missing—"

"I'm sure he does." Ben had never seen Doc lose his professional cool before.

"No, Ben, more than usual. Warren Blake and his brother are twins."

"Twins? Identical twins?"

"Yes. There are just the two of them in the family and they're identical. Except that Warren is married and his brother's not." Doc hurried his putt. He missed, but it didn't matter. The game was over as far as he was concerned. Lou rarely showed any emotion, but the upset he was feeling had quickly come to the surface.

"If we have a dead dentist and a missing twin brother, maybe we've found our John Doe," Ben said.

"What do you mean?"

Ben's eyes had that "mystery-solved" look. "The twin took his brother's place."

Doc looked dourly at his friend. "Let's go back to the clubhouse. I've seen you grab at straws, but never like this."

The two got into the golf cart and drove back to the clubhouse.

At the equipment-rental window, Ben said, "Have you ever been to Bermuda, Doc? You don't need a passport, you know. I'd bet you could go to Bermuda and come back under a different name." He was looking at Lou with a dead-serious expression Lou had never seen outside of work before. "Figure it out," he said. "Why cut off the head of a dead man and burn his hands in nitric acid? Why not just cut off his hands as well?"

"Because it's harder than obscuring the prints with acid."

"Then why not acid-burn the face?"

"Because the head is more complicated," Lou said. "Dental records will provide the major clue to a body. It may be gruesome, Ben, but when I.D. is likely to lead directly to the killer, cutting off the victim's head is effective."

"Except," Ben said, "as part of the murder plan you also need to discard the head where it's unlikely to be found. Like overboard with the clothing."

Ben and Doc moved on to the lounge. "What are you saying, Ben?" Lou asked. "That Warren Blake was murdered by his twin brother and his brother stole his identity? The only thing wrong with killing

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a dentist, Ben, is that when you take his place, you have to know how to dent."

Ben Sherman remained unperturbed. He had a saying—"A solution this close deserves a happy ending." The tired rings under his eyes were looking forward to a peaceful night's sleep. "Do you know where Warren Blake is, Doc?"

"Warren became seriously ill and he and his wife went to Florida." Lou stopped short. "He—retired."

The pieces began to fit. The missing Blake prevailed on his twin brother, now presumably the late Warren Blake, to drive him to the cruise ship. Then, in the Sneda Woods, the murder and decapitation, the acid burning, and the removal of the clothing. And the first night out to sea, the evidence is dropped overboard. Home again to Florida on a prearranged flight with false identification and perhaps a disguise, the dentist's twin took his retired brother's place.

At the entrance to the bar, Ben turned to his friend. "Do you mind, Doc? I have to get back to the office. There's someone in Florida I want to contact."

Ben's confidence sent a chill down Doc's spine. "Warren's wife can certainly tell the difference between her husband and his twin, Ben, no matter how identical they are."

"That's right," Ben said emphatically. "So now we know the motive. Someone had to drive the car back from the cruise ship and pick up her lover from the airport."

DETECTIVERSE

FOR AULD LANG SYNE

by GAIL KAY HAINES

There once was a golfer named Dick Fine,
Who always had time for a quick nine.
He fell groaning one day
In the middle of play—
His wife laced his hip flask with strychnine.

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a *NEW* Big Red Fred story by

THOMAS ADCOCK

"I feel like I'm doing time!" Patsy Harmon said. "You know, house arrest. You hear the phone ringing anywhere in here? I got five rooms in this dump and five phones—you'd think one of 'em might ring . . ."

THE LIFE OF A BIG WHALE

by THOMAS ADCOCK

When I saw Patsy Harmon lying there with a bullet in his neck I was sadly unsurprised, and from the expression on his face I would guess Patsy felt about the same the last time he could feel anything.

Now he was belly-up on a black-linoleum floor, his lanky body outlined in white chalk. Up at the bar where he'd last been leaning was an ashtray with three Lucky Strike butts in it, his brand. Next to this was a half empty lowball glass of Scotch whisky diluted with milk because of Patsy's ulcers. There was also a cup of black coffee gone cold, and since this refreshment was presumed to have belonged to the unknown person who had left the encounter alive, one of the forensics cops was dusting it with fingerprint powder for whatever benefit it might provide the host of this gathering, Detective Joseph Logue of the homicide squad.

It was half past eight in the morning of a cold, rainy November Sunday. Ordinarily, I would have been home in my warm bed, with my wife Jean up getting dressed and making a lot of noise about it and pestering me about church, which is one of her few faults. Instead, there I was in this illegal saloon and casino in the dank cellar of a nondescript warehouse near the river with my friend Logue, contemplating the dead body of an old hustler acquaintance of mine I'd recently written up for the magazine where I work.

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"Sort of ironic, ain't it?" Logue said to me. "Practically nobody in town has the time of day for Patsy since twelve years ago, when he went into the trap the last time, then for all the years since he's been out—"

"Then I go put him in print," I finished his thought, "and the name of Patsy Harmon isn't on the newsstands two weeks before somebody cancels him out. Yeah, Joe, I'd say this is at least ironic."

"So what do you make of it? So far as I know, you're the next-to-last person who talked to Patsy about a serious subject. Which is why I called you exclusive on this story, on account of how you might be able to help me get started."

"I'm flattered as hell you thought enough of me to drag me out of bed to come shiver alongside you, but this is no scoop for me and you know it. I work on a monthly. Besides which, I'm no detective."

"Let me ask you—you see any signs of struggle anywhere here?"

I scanned the room again and said I didn't. It was a big, rectangular place, with pipes and vents crisscrossing the high ceiling. The bar was set up in the middle and there was a kitchen along one wall. Tables were scattered around for 21, craps, and tonk. And off in a corner was a wire room for horses and the national sports betting line. This was a joint Patsy would have been running himself.

"So you don't need to be a detective to see how this here cancellation was personal business," Logue said. "And you happen to be somebody who was asking the deceased a lot of personal questions not so long ago. So I'm thinking maybe you didn't run all the answers in the magazine."

I thought about how this made sense from Logue's perspective. The only trouble was, I couldn't think of much I'd left out of the article that meant anything in the way of clues.

A couple of the camera boys started taking pictures of the body from different angles and I looked again at Patsy's face, white from the loss of blood and whiter still in the flashing strobe lights. "To me, it looks like Patsy was lured down here by somebody who had something unpleasant to tell him."

"That's putting it mild."

"And I'd say from the looks of him that poor old Patsy somehow half expected what happened was going to happen—at least when he could see the lights were going to go out on him."

Logue agreed. "Yeah, he don't look at all shocked like most stiffs do when they get it like he did."

"And like you say, Patsy's been out of circulation for years. Maybe

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you lose your balance after you're out of the game for a while, maybe you can't figure how nasty it can be sometimes."

Logue nodded. "I'll give you that, too. In the rackets, you have to be figuring what awful thing can be done to you that's even worse than some terrible thing you're doing to somebody else. Out of the rackets, you can afford to have a sunnier outlook."

"But, hell, Joe, somebody must have seen something here." This was the dumbest thing I would have to say that entire day, and there it was bright and early out of my mouth—which had yet to taste coffee that morning and that may be the explanation for the lapse in thought.

Logue grinned patiently at me like I was wearing a round haircut and said, "Sometimes it ain't the most efficient thing a cop can do to right away try rounding up witnesses."

And when he said that, a certain part of the Patsy Harmon story I'd written passed through my mind like some old tune whose lyrics I remember for reasons I've forgotten. Joe Logue had telephoned me that morning operating on pure detective instinct, because he knew the chances were good I'd have the quickest answer to the question of the late Patsy Harmon. Because he somehow knew, hours before I did, that the answer was buried somewhere between the lines I'd written.

By the way, I'm Fred Walsh. I work for *Detroit Expression*. And we're quite the unlikely combination.

The magazine is one of those slick, four-color booster jobs you see now in practically any American city bigger than Duluth. The underlying drumbeat of the contents is what a distinct thrill it is to live in the magazine's particular metropolis, even though the vast majority of townfolk spend their nights drinking beer in front of the television set like they do in every other town of any size whatsoever.

I consider myself luckier than most writers for such outfits. Very often in my stories, nobody is what you might call upbeat, though I do like to think my work is uplifting in certain ways. Since I'm considered the office antique by my painfully young colleagues, I'm mostly left alone to pursue what I've been doing for my living since the days when I actually wore a card in my hatband, same as the rest of the street reporters on the *Detroit Times*, now extinct. I wrote about crime and criminals who held a certain moral code, which among other things in those days rendered them too embarrassed

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to run for public office. And that's what I've been writing about ever since.

I would have happily remained at the *Times* if not for the fact of my being blacklisted in the Fifties, which was a slogan-clogged political era that I wrongly believed would warn us off simpletons and zealots forever. The *Times* gave me the sack because I didn't care to snitch on friends of mine who thought unpopular thoughts. I twisted slowly in the wind until I got the message that I wasn't about to be employed on any of the other respectable papers. So one day, hearing of my jobless plight, the communist *Daily Worker* offered me a job writing about crime and I took it. I didn't think much more of that rag than I think of the place where I'm working today, with the exception that if you allow for inflation the commies paid me better.

Anyway, that's how I continued writing about crime and criminals, all of whom held me in high esteem for my refusal to be a stool-pigeon down in Washington. The byline still read Fred Walsh all through the *Daily Worker* years, but people took to calling me "Big Red Fred" and most meant it as a slur. The nickname stuck, but the stigma faded over time. I happen to be tall and I've still got some hair on my head the color of carrots.

The *Expression* is a retirement job, for which my wife and I are grateful. Even when you're pensioned off like me, it's important to get out the door every day. So I still work. And the stories I write—like the one just published on Patsy Harmon, a hood in the twilight of his crooked life—keep me on balance. Which I now see can be a major factor accounting for a man's longevity.

You look at his surroundings up in the suburb of Ferndale and you don't right away think, here lives a world-class gambler, pal of mob heavies and overlord of after-hours joints all over Detroit that drew suckers from three states and the province of Ontario. You look at the man's white-frame house with blue shutters and an aluminum storm door on a street full of red maple trees and neat lawns and second-hand cars and you think retired postal clerk.

Patsy Harmon is discreet.

Which is not to say his life has been altogether a quiet affair. He was practically a commuter between Detroit and Amsterdam at one time. He's outlived three wives and twice as many prosecutors. And he's done time, mostly small stretches back during the Depression and the war on various counts of bootlegging and gaming. His long-

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est stretch in the trap was back in the middle of the Fifties when he cooled off a once-friendly rival by the name of Charlie Templeton in Templeton's own joint on Gratiot Avenue out near City Airport. One slug in the chest and Charlie was a dead man. But Patsy's lawyer got him fifteen months in Jackson State Prison on a guilty plea for carrying a concealed weapon.

Then for the next twenty years or so, Patsy was in the headlines all the time. Various raids on his gambling joints or when some of his hired help got busted or grand-jury indictments, that sort of thing. But Patsy always walked, thanks to quality lawyers from the finest schools in the country and to his long-standing custom of making sure every precinct in the city was full of his charity, especially in the station houses.

But one year an auditor from the Internal Revenue Service changed Patsy's life. Among other things, Patsy was sentenced to five years' probation, which is not conducive to Patsy's kind of career. When the Feds give out probation in lieu of stir, a guy like Patsy is automatically assumed by the Feds to be perfectly willing to join up with the frequent-flier program of every airline so he can testify in front of grand juries from coast to coast about the activities of his cronies.

"I ain't no snitch!" Patsy says in the parlor of his little Ferndale house. (He's half watching the Oprah Winfrey Show and the Sears Roebuck coffee table in front of him is stacked high with newspapers. He's smoking Chesterfields and drinking milk, which at the stroke of five o'clock he peps up with some Scotch on his personal theory that ulcers are daytime maladies.) "And everybody knew it right up to the time they started flying me all over the place to sing.

"New York, Chicago, Miami, 'Frisco. You name the town, I been in its grand-jury room. Even though I took the Fifth every time, it got so I was spending so much of my life on planes and inside them jury rooms that friends couldn't help imagining I might say something just to break the monotony."

The rumors about Patsy ratting on everybody he knew from his salad days never quite died, despite the fact that to this date nobody in New York or Chicago or Miami or San Francisco or even locally has yet been brought to trial on the basis of one shred of evidence or secret testimony that could possibly be traced back to Harmon. In fact, Patsy so infuriated one Federal grand jury in Detroit twelve years ago—on a day in late July when the air-conditioning blew and the jurors had to sit through a stifling morning and half an afternoon

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listening to Patsy invoke the Fifth Amendment—that they sent him off to an Illinois penitentiary for eight months on a contempt-of-judicial-process citation. During this last stay in the trap, Patsy slipped and fell on the shower-room floor and broke his left hip.

But at least the government gave up on him as a grand-jury witness.

"There was even this one Assistant D.A.," Patsy says, "who helped me get all the Social Security I had coming to me but I never claimed until ten years after I was eligible."

Which is how Patsy Harmon came up with the downpayment on his little house in Ferndale, where nobody comes visiting or rings him up on the telephone, where he sits and smokes and reads the papers and watches television.

"It's a crime what's been done to me," he says.

By Patsy's lights, maybe it is. He has a good little house, a dependable Chevrolet parked in the side drive, enough money in the mail to take care of his needs, Medicare and so forth, he hasn't been in a grand-jury room in twelve years, he could go fishing any time he wanted to, or own a dog or maybe get married again, but he might as well be in the trap.

"I feel like I'm doing time!" He coughs and uses a remote switch to dial off the news and tune in a rerun of *Gilligan's Island*. "You know, house arrest. You hear the phone ringing anywhere in here? I got five rooms in this dump and five phones—you'd think one of 'em might ring.

"I tell you straight out, back in my playing days I was known to be good for taking ten grand on a number, personal. Now I can't get a jingle outa my phones and the NCAA basketball championship is on and it's six days before the Leonard-Hagler fight in Vegas. Guys used to call me up from all over the friggin' world for odds, or point spreads. Now—zip!

"So get a load of me now and ask yourself, ain't what they done to me a crime? Look at me sitting here in front of the tube, which is like some plug-in narcotic drug, I swear. And nobody calls because they think I'm some kinda big trouble for 'em.

"Oh, I used to have the life. Big broads, lots of dough, a private box at the Hazel Park track, good booze. And the clubs. I always ran a good square club with a little class and plenty of action, especially with the dice, which I personally loved to play myself. Now I'm looking for all the world like some gimpy geek at the senior

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center—and down at the track they don't want my money no more. Worst of all, the only dice left to me is on Monopoly boards."

When he was a kid and Monopoly was something played on margins on Wall Street trading floors, Harmon used to hang out with a gang on East Jefferson Boulevard in the vicinity of Water Works Park. That's where the better opportunities for mugging and auto theft existed, in the cluster of smart East Side restaurants and nightclubs.

"My formative years," Patsy says.

"Two in the morning every morning like clockwork this Italian guy would come by a place called Curcio's for espresso. He'd come in this big Lincoln with a chauffeur. His name was Fabrizio and he had this club out in Grosse Pointe he thought was too la-de-da for him personally, even though that's where he makes his haul.

"Anyways, he comes by Curcio's every night outa habit—or maybe on business, which don't matter now anyhow since Fabrizio's dead and Curcio's gone and the last time anybody heard an Italian word spoken on East Jefferson was maybe in 'sixty-seven just before the riot.

"I called him Mr. Fab, which he liked so much he used it to rename his club one year to Mr. Fab's. So he takes this shine to me, outa all them guys I hung with.

"One night he calls me over and says to me, 'What are you doing out so late, son?' And I tell him, 'Trying to make a dishonest living.' And Mr. Fab, he laughs so hard I thought he'd lose his teeth. He says to me, 'You want a good-paying job, son, you come to my place and I'll give you work.' So I went out to Mr. Fab's in the suit my daddy bought me for going to church, and they put me to work and taught me."

And what a student Patsy was. He took to the croupier's stick like a baby takes to a rattle. He ingratiated himself with every heavyweight in the national gambling fraternity and he made friends with other young men like himself trying to work up the ranks of wiseguys—including Charlie Templeton.

At Mr. Fab's out in Grosse Pointe, Patsy and Charlie were the prize pupils and the old man's most driven workers. They started out together "on the fence," as Mr. Fab called it—which meant they hung around in the shadows of fences the height of some billboards waiting with their flashlights for the right kind of cars to come by so they could be led to a parking space near the four-story mansion on a cul-de-sac. From there they graduated to the door of the place,

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where they inspected the membership cards and kept guns in their pockets in case somebody might not understand house rules or objected to being frisked on entry.

And then they were inside, Charlie and Patsy, working the craps tables, card games, and the roulette wheel, and tending to the huge board of race results. They did the smaller tasks, too, such as stocking the bar and hiring show-girl types to run the coat-check rooms and glide around in fishnet stockings under little skirts and low-cut tops that showed off plenty of curves when they leaned forward with their trays of cigars and cigarettes. And, as it sometimes happens in nature, one of the curviest of this bevy eventually came between the two friends.

Her name was Ruby. Patsy was out at Belle Isle Park one steaming July afternoon, all by himself and listening to Dixieland jazz at the bandshell near the fountain with the stone monkeys, when along came Ruby, eighteen and gorgeous and unaccompanied, and young Patsy Harmon went very weak in the knees. Coincidentally, that was exactly what happened to young Charlie Templeton's knees when Patsy first brought Ruby around to Mr. Fab's and dressed her up in a cigarette-girl ensemble.

Inevitably, Ruby had to make a choice—and she picked Charlie. Which didn't sit well with Patsy at all and taught him for the first time how much he disliked losing. Before long, Charlie and Ruby drifted away from their jobs at Mr. Fab's and then they drifted away from everyone they'd known at the place. It was only by accident that Patsy heard about how they'd opened up what is known in the gambling trade as a "sawdust house"—a no-frills, illegal casino with just craps, blackjack, and horses, and a table for holding beer by the pitcher and a couple of runners for Chinese food or cigarettes or scratch sheets. Patsy hadn't been looking for them, but somebody mentioned in passing how Ruby and Charlie had a sweet little operation going for themselves and a curiosity born of residual jealousy is seldom resisted, and one night Patsy found himself in their place.

At the trial, a runner testified that Patsy and Charlie had argued along about three o'clock in the morning when Patsy bulled his way inside, but that Charlie had allowed Patsy to remain on the premises anyway. Which was a bad idea, since Patsy couldn't let Ruby pass without a few choice words for her. And then Charlie walked over to where Patsy was shooting craps right up to the five-hundred-dollar limit and mostly winning and lunged at Patsy and poked him

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in the chest with what looked like a fist. Then the two old pals took their argument outside to an alley.

After a few minutes in the alley, during which time a shot rang out, Patsy walked back through the open doorway to the casino's back room holding a smoking .45 and was met there by three Detroit cops who claimed they were hanging on their own free time in the interests of "monitoring crime." Patsy told the cops how Charlie had reached into his pocket after a gun and was yelling at him like crazy and cursing his family tree. The alley was almost pitch-black with shadows, Patsy further explained, and he felt he had to defend himself under the law of God.

As it happened, Charlie did have a loaded gun in his pocket. That fact was quickly established by the three public-spirited cops. And so it took a jury only about an hour to decide that Patsy was mostly innocent in the eyes of God, but that he was guilty of carrying a concealed weapon—a crime to which Patsy and his lawyer had already eagerly confessed. Since it seemed that Charlie, too, had been carrying, and paid for this infraction with his life, the jury reasoned that it was only square that Patsy should spend a little time in the slammer and pony up a few thousand dollars' fine besides.

So a little poorer and fifteen months older, Patsy walked out of Jackson State Prison and caught a bus back home to Detroit, where the first piece of news that awaited him was that old Fabrizio was on his deathbed.

Patsy's hand lay on Fabrizio's fevered brow as the old man told him, "Son, you're very big in my will," then slipped away. Patsy felt like a winner, which doesn't usually happen so quickly after better than a year behind bars—even in that short time, even a young man can become an ashen relic from the experience. But according to Fabrizio's will, Patsy was the new owner of the Grosse Pointe property known informally as Mr. Fab's. From a lowly job on the fence, up through the ranks and on through a treacherous love affair and the killing of his one-time best friend, Patsy Harmon now sat in the big chair.

"Out of respect to the old man, we still called it Mr. Fab's," Patsy says. "And out of further respect, we start really making the joint truly fabulous. I mean, it was the best gambling joint between New York illegal and Vegas legal. We had the big whales—what we called the high-rollers good for a minimum fifty-grand credit line—picked up at the airport by some hostesses in the backs of stretch limos and they'd get put up at the old Book-Cadillac in suites

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that come with whatever they want in the way of comforts, including their choice of sex, quick or slow.

"Then for the big whales, you know, you gotta put out a private floor show, which we did. I ain't going to say the stars we had come in on the hush to do a show because I ain't sure they're all dead and gone, but believe me we had the bigs.

"So you have any idea how much we make back off the tables? Plenty, I can tell you. I got to be a big whale myself, and that's when I started going back and forth to Europe. I'm making so much cash all I can do with it is open up more joints around town, classy places like Mr. Fab's and little sawdust joints for the sailors and the local suckers.

"Oh, they tried busting me all the time. I could understand how somebody figured they could do a Tom Dewey number with a political career, so it didn't bother me so much. I was always pretty careful about balancing out this irritating group of politicians by treating the majority of them like they was big whales even though they weren't. So all my joints were lousy with public servants.

"For twenty-five years nearly, I walk outa every trial they put on me a free man. Nothing they could dream up could stick. And meantime I'm making more and more and more. I don't mind saying it was a little boring sometimes, and I'd just go off on the big-whale circuit and blow my top. Bahamas, Amsterdam, Vegas. Until the day this little creep from the I.R.S. sends around a form letter to my house saying he's set me an appointment to come by and check out my receipts and calendars and every other piece of paper I got laying around for the last three years' worth of taxes. My lawyer, for all the dough he's making off me, says I ain't got no choice about seeing the man.

"So this character in a crummy brown-corduroy suit walks into my life with his adding machine. He's got big glasses and beady eyes and he just sits there with his pencils and his adding machine, measuring up my life. And then he takes me to tax court, where I'm sentenced to this parole officer, who signs me out of town every time one of his government pals calls him up and says they have to fly me someplace to try to get me to snitch on somebody I know from my twenty-five fabulous years.

"But like I said, nobody really believes me from my reputation, which is I ain't a snitch. So I'm out of it, you know? Blacklisted in Vegas. In Amsterdam, they tell me I can buy drinks and watch. And in the Bahamas, the government there has me stop-listed at the

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airport and I wind up on the turnaround flight to Miami in forty-five minutes flat. The I.R.S. takes over Mr. Fab's for back taxes and one by one they find out where I got sawdust joints and close them up, too, at a public auction. I'm sitting up in my house on Boston Boulevard, this swell Italianate spread, and I just know they're coming after that next, which eventually they do since I'm frozen outa any way of making the fat payments the I.R.S. is gouging me for.

"Which is how come I wind up in this crackerbox in Ferndale, watching the damn tube and waiting for calls that don't come. I can't even go downtown no more since it ain't the downtown I knew.

"So maybe I'll start taking the Scotch straight and do myself in, starting with blowing up my guts on pure booze. I don't know. Outa respect for the past, when I was just an honest-enough scammer selling a little or a lot of fantasy, depending on a guy's pocketbook, I suppose I ought to stick it out long enough for a merciful God to do it to me natural. But Christamighty, ain't it a bloody crime what's become of me?"

All of this Logue knows from reading my piece in the *Expression* when it hit the newsstands two weeks ago, and from my rehashing the story face-to-face over breakfast at the city's expense—a treat which I did not protest.

Logue and I had removed ourselves from the dank scene of Patsy's untimely end to the warmth of my regular morning establishment, Busy Betty's Cafe on Cass Avenue. It was minus Betty herself that Sunday, but it was nonetheless full of the usual good coffee and ham and eggs I've known since 1945. Like me, Logue drank a beer with his eggs. And I was turning over in my mind the epilogue I would have to start writing, which would contain some answers as to how to tighten up the loose ends in Logue's murder case.

To my question, Logue told me how the call came in about the shooting.

"Just after four this morning, I get this call at home from the desk sergeant out of the Delray precinct station. It seems he's there with a nervous uniform kid who makes a habit out of stopping by this blind-pig establishment of his own free will."

"No doubt he drops by to monitor crime," I said.

"You think anything ever changes?"

I shook my head and Logue went on. "Anyhow, the kid cop is the

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type we got now who went to college and he's moonlighting as a law-school student, right?"

"Not a bad way to build up a clientele before you get your attorney's shingle," I said. "Everybody you bust may be a customer down the line."

"Also, the kid since he's taking classes knows all about the little matter of misprision, which is especially to be avoided when your day job involves wearing the colors."

"And misprision is?"

"It's when you neglect your civic duty to report a crime when you see one that's just happened—which was the case with the kid. He noticed the blind-pig emptying out at a quick rate of speed and lots earlier than usual, and by the time he got around to the bar where your friend Patsy was having himself a permanent nightcap there's practically nobody around except the body he stumbles over in the dim light.

"So you can see what I mean about the inefficiency of looking up witnesses under the circumstances?"

"You don't have to rub it in."

"Okay. So, anyway, that's how I get the call. Being that it's Patsy Harmon, who I remember from the fog of the past, I decide to get on this. Out of respect, maybe. Patsy was a big guy in this town once, back when the town was big itself."

"How do you figure it played?"

"Like you said, somebody got Patsy down there somehow to tell him something. And Patsy was off-balance enough to take the bait, even if it was an invitation to a blind-pig where he's been eighty-sixed for all these years." Logue belched softly. "You say he had five phones in his house?"

"That's correct."

"You see my point—the guy was begging to be set up for a fall. Somebody's willing to ring, he's willing to jump."

"That makes sense."

"And while the perpetrator's making nice at the bar with him—"

"What kind of gun?"

"Small-bore .25 automatic with blow-back action, it looks like. We got the shell and there ain't any burns on Patsy's neck. The kid cop says he might have been near enough to hear a bigger gun pop, but an automatic's quiet and in a crowd like that it wouldn't be such a trick to squeeze one off with nobody the wiser until they noticed how somebody had fallen on the floor. Which, of course, at four in

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the morning is likely to happen to quite a few customers even when they don't get neatly shot."

Logue looked at me then like he was thinking the same thing I was and right at the same time.

"Then you're after a killer who's wise to the right kind of tool for the job, a killer who's got entree to a blind-pig and some kind of motive for getting Patsy out of his house arrest up in Ferndale."

We headed up and across town through the grey rain to number 1300 Beaubien Street, headquarters of the Detroit Police Department, which houses a miraculous computerized system of mugshots that enables a person to pick out a photo and rapsheet on known data-search factors as scant as a first name.

Just before noon we walked into the lobby of the Harmony Arms. This is a brick-and-limestone hulk off Grand Circus Park that's sagging and peeling all over—pretty much like the rest of Detroit, except for a cluster of shiny glass-and-steel towers down by Cobo Hall that look like barnyard silos to me but are very big attractions for postal-card photographers and touring convention-site selection committees. Once upon a time not so terribly long ago, you could stroll out from the once gilded lobby and past a doorman who looked like a white-whiskered Prussian general, cross West Adams Street, and find yourself a nice, quiet oak bench in an elegant park right in the heart of the city—a park with gushing fountains full of naked marble ladies holding baskets full of grapes, with grass and flowers and news kiosks, whose attendants sold papers and magazines from all over America and Europe besides.

The fountains sort of dribble and slobber today, the grass and flower beds were asphalted some years back and now sprout pale-green weeds between the cracks, and vandals set fire to most of the benches and made off with all the lovely stone nudes that were hot stuff back before smut had become as American as apple pie and ten times more ubiquitous.

Logue showed the desk clerk a warrant and was given a key to Room 408 on the fourth floor. The elevator was broken, we were informed, so we headed up the stairs.

I hadn't been in the place in a dozen years or better, and despite the fact that it was a weird time for me to be reminiscing I was gently cheered to feel how the house still resonated of palmy times. It was clean and the steam pipes were sound. The desk clerk was apologetic, at least, about the elevator. And the corridors smelled

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of laundry soap and drugstore talcum like aged, fussed-over hotels should properly smell. Never mind that every last one of the Turkish rugs was frayed, that the plaster moldings were full of chinks, that the floorboards groaned and creaked, that the brocade curtains had grown stringy and brittle—what's important was that the old dump was a real and true home to its now mostly permanent residents.

But one resident was soon to be taken away forever.

Logue knocked on the door of Number 408 and had me stand to the side while he did.

We didn't hear anything by way of response. Logue knocked again and unbuttoned his raincoat and then his suitcoat, in case he had to draw his .38 police special.

Then there was the sound of slippers on a wooden floor. "Yes? Who is it?" The voice was tiny and old and scratched by booze and smoking. And feminine.

"Detective Joseph Logue, Detroit Police Department."

There was a sigh. Then she opened up and stood there in a blue housedress that fit like a light tent over her stocky frame. "Well, you might as well come in," she said.

And, to me, Ruby didn't look any more surprised than Patsy had.

She sat down on the edge of her bed, which was covered over with a thin spread that had little embroidered balls all over it, and motioned us to sit down on the two chairs in the room, a wooden one that was shoved below a little desk by the window overlooking West Adams Street and a green, silk-covered easy chair with fringe on the bottom that looked like it might have come out of an old whorehouse. Logue took the whorehouse chair.

Ruby looked at me like I was guilty of something. "I seen your picture. You're that writer, Walsh the old lefty, ain't I right?"

I told her she was right.

"You know, Walsh, if it wasn't for you tellin' that story you told, I wouldn't of done it. I didn't want to do it, see. I had to, though."

"Before you say anything else," Logue said, "I have to tell you your rights."

Which he did. And when he'd finished, Ruby said, "Aw, nuts to the damn law, okay? I'll spill right now if you want and then you can haul my old ass away—I don't care no more."

"Go ahead," Logue said. "How come you killed Patsy Harmon?"

"Because the son of a bitch was too lucky, that's how come. Once I thought, okay, he waltzes through a little time at Jackson after

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he kills my man Charlie. It tears me up, but you know you have certain risks going in—I mean, we're in gambling, after all. But then he comes out and takes over Mr. Fab's—and he's got himself, what, twenty–thirty years of a good old high life while my Charlie's dead and I'm killing myself working sawdust houses and having to sell it on the side besides, just to keep myself going.

"Then I hear on the vine how he's in the clutches of the Treasury boys. Now, finally, I figure the odds are evening out. And besides that, I hear he breaks his hip in stir. Then I don't hear anything more about him and I figure, since he's about that age, he croaked from the broken hip.

"For years, I got my losses cut. I've made peace with my ghosts. Then I pick up this magazine and I read where the guy's up in a house all by himself outside the city and he's feeling sorry for himself because nobody calls him up, the poor sot!

"This infuriates me to no end, so I start thinking how I'm finally going to settle his hash. I claim a couple of I.O.U.s and talk the management of this blind-pig down by the river into letting in this sorrowful old Patsy for one night only, as my guest, and then I call him up and tell him I want to see him for old time's sake, no hard feelings. And the stupe, he buys it."

She pointed a bony finger at a bureau in a corner of the room. "You'll be wanting my gun. It's in the top drawer."

Logue lifted himself up out of the green-silk chair, walked over to the bureau, and pulled open the top drawer. He wrapped up the automatic in an evidentiary plastic bag and slipped it into the side pocket of his suitcoat.

"That's about it, I guess," Ruby said. "I was sitting at the bar with him and not all the way decided on whether I'm going to kill him when he starts blowing off about how me and him could make a good team all over again. I think to myself, this guy's gotta learn what goes up has gotta come down. So with pleasure I give him one pill. Just like he gave my Charlie. Only Patsy, he gets his medicine close up so he's got a couple of seconds to see his luck go to hell at long last."

Later that afternoon I sat down at my typewriter in the little study I made in the attic of my house. And I thought about my epilogue. And the more I thought about it, the more I remembered the sight of Patsy's dead face.

I saw a man who truly saw himself, if only for the trace of a second.

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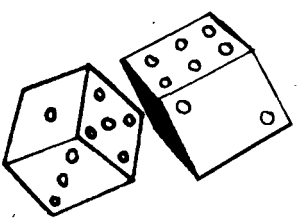
He was a guy who had beaten the law most of his life only to be blindsided late in the game. He'd spent the best part of his life on the house side of his favored craps table, and all through those years it had been inconceivable to him that the dice could beat him.

And he realized—so briefly—that all of the things that had gone with the dice and the life of a big whale—the high times, the women, the friends, the booze, the loyalties, the loot—were forgotten or useless or dead.

In the flash-point of Ruby's revenge, Patsy Harmon learned what he should have known all along: ultimately, nobody beats the odds. Not even guys who make them.



DETECTIVERSE

SOME PEOPLE LOVE THEM

by WILLIAM J. GILLMORE

Hustler Harry aspired to be
The greatest bandit in history—
To become so famous for big-time crime
Even Jesse James would seem five-and-dime.
He chose his first bank and cased it well,
Belted some booze, all qualms to quell—
The holdup went off without a hitch
And Harry felt smug and tough and rich.
Masked, gun in hand, he dashed for the street,
Puzzledly hearing a march-time beat,
And came to a sobbing halt, dismayed,
Alongside the annual police parade.

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THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Private investigators continue to flourish in our field, and to attract strong new writers. So it's easy to put together a column exclusively dealing with good examples.

Welcome Michael Allegretto. I think he's going to be around a long while, based on his masterful debut, *Death on the Rocks* (Scribners, $15.95), to which the good folks who hand out best first-mystery-novel awards should pay close attention. This introduces Jacob Lomax of Denver, once a cop and now of the private persuasion. Phillip Townsend, an inoffensive and wealthy man, drove his Jaguar off a mountain road. Local police said accident. His widow, distraught and unable to accept this verdict, hires Lomax to investigate. Jacob peels away a layer or two of Townsend goodness to find, beneath, a person into hired sex, enslaved to more grotesque varieties and the pervasively evil people who make such diversions available for a fee. Explosive and compelling narrative, with excellent pace and solid observation.

The first novel by San Francisco private investigator Jerry Kennealy is *Polo Solo* (St. Martin's, $13.95), about Nick Polo, San Francisco private investigator. Owing to his sticky fingers, Polo is suffering the hospitality of the State of California when a well connected politico springs him for a special job. It seems the woman mayor of San Francisco is being blackmailed over naughty pictures, and her money, her reputation, and her greater political aspirations are in great jeopardy. Polo's quest is a bloody, violent sprint and a galloping read, though the motivation of one of the characters severely stretched my capacity for belief.

Another debut with more depth and substance is *An Infinite Number of Monkeys* by Les Roberts (St. Martin's, $12.95). Saxon is an infrequent actor who investigates between roles. He's drawn into the life of Buck Weldon, writer whose creation of a private eye named Bart Steele (read Mike Hammer) has propelled him into fame and fortune. It seems that someone prefers a dead Buck Weldon, so Saxon goes looking for motives. They are not hard to find: Weldon's drug-connected daughter, the ex-husband to his other daughter (the stunningly beautiful Tori), the crooked movie mogul Weldon is writing into his current thriller. But some piece is missing. You'll find this an absorbing tale, and Saxon is an intriguing character of many parts—some very appealing, though, wretched man that he is, he thinks here to build a lasting relationship on a foundation of consummated lust.

D. Miller Morgan begins with

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Money Leads to Murder (Dodd Mead, $15.95), which introduces Daisy Marlow, private eye based in San Diego but here operating largely in Las Vegas. Marlow is a widow: middle-aged, given to strong drink, weighing in at 183 pounds, a no-nonsense woman. Here the scion of a hotel family asks her to check out the disappearance of a Vegas stripper. This job turns out to be simple—disquietingly so. Meanwhile, people are dying in Vegas and Daisy's old friend, Vegas cop Sam Milo, is also trying to close down a hotel cum bordello cum drug-distribution center. A lively and promising start for Morgan and Marlow.

Jake Samson, with his colleague Rosie, is something of an unlicensed private eye. In *Spit in the Ocean* (St. Martin's, $14.95) by Shelley Singer, Samson's fourth appearance, Jake goes to Wheeler, a town on the Northern California coast. Here the North Coast Sperm Bank has been vandalized, its sperm reserves dumped into the ocean and its donor records scrambled. Nora Canfield, aggressive operator of the bank, wants Jake and Rosie to find out what the attack on her operation is all about. Not everyone in Wheeler thinks the bank is a proper enterprise, not everyone welcomes strangers from San Francisco butting into local affairs. Then an employee of the bank dies, an apparent victim of the dangerous winter storm tearing into Wheeler off a grey and heaving sea. And Rosie's vehicle develops a serious and unexpected malfunction. Jake and Rosie are surely treading in perilous waters. Crisp storytelling, with the environs and people sharply limned.

The third in Edward Mathis' solid series about Texas private eye Dan Roman is *Natural Prey* (Scribners, $15.95). Roman is hired to retrieve a stray husband and father, who proves not unwilling to return to the bosom of his family—where, in very short order, he's shot to death. Wife and children have impeccable alibis, and seem ill-designed for suspect status in any event. Dan would like to stay out of all this and spend time shoring up his relationship with his wife, a much traveled TV-news reporter. But Captain Homer Sellers, who was Roman's boss when he was a cop, induces him to play a sort of official role in the investigation. Shortly two more are dead in the same executive-style fashion. Is a psychopath randomly picking off victims? Mathis does excellent work, plotting adeptly and probing well beneath the surface of character and situation.

Miles Tripp brings back his London private investigator John Samson in *Death of a Man-Tamer* (St. Martin's, $13.95). Paul Phelan, a man of checkered past, is in the present a trapper of endangered animal species for private zoos. This occupation, which he unwisely exposes to public view on a TV talk-show, does not go down well with all members of the public. It lands him naked in a cage under the less than tender ministrations of a trio of masked women. One of them turns up dead in suggestive proximity to Phelan,

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who goes to Samson for help in evading the clutches of the police. So Samson dodges detectives and explores the fringes of society where kinky sex hides out. Spare, effective storytelling.

Fire Lake (Delacorte, $14.95) is the latest in Jonathan Valin's grim series about private eye Harry Stoner. Lonnie Jackowski was a college friend of Stoner's who disappeared into drugs and rock music. Now, almost twenty years later, a motel owner's call brings Stoner to the rescue, retrieving a badly beaten "Lonnie Jack" to Harry's apartment. Shortly the motel owner is brutally murdered, Lonnie disappears, deadbeat hoodlums demand their cache of cocaine or else, a deadbeat cop takes his turn pounding on Stoner, and Harry and Lonnie's ex-wife (when not in bed) try to figure out where Lonnie is and who's behind the killing. A memorable tour of the Cincinnati sewers.

The ninth novel about L.A. private investigator Jacob Asch is *Fast Fade* (Mysterious Press, $15.95). Lori Norris comes to Asch with a photograph and a request. Prove that a man in the photograph—movie director Walter Cairns, currently filming in Palm Springs—is really her first husband, William McVey, who abandoned her and their daughter in Atlanta twelve years before. Seems unlikely, but a client is a client. So down to Palm Springs, where Cairns proves to be a loathsome creature of ghastly sexual persuasions. And very soon dead in fitting, if by no means pleasant, circumstances. By virtue of diligent tracking and some judicious breaking and entering, Jacob follows the trail of corpses to the wrapup. Crisp and tense and colorful narrative.

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SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT TO EQMM READERS

Your votes for the third annual Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Readers Award have been tallied and the winner for 1987 is:

ROBERT BARNARD for "The Woman in the Wardrobe"

"The Woman in the Wardrobe" was Robert Barnard's tenth story to appear in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. The range of Mr. Barnard's stories—from irreverent and hilarious to compassionate and grim—is remarkable. The depth of the characterizations and the clever yet believable twists in "The Woman in the Wardrobe" are echoed in his longer fiction, such as *Political Suicide* (Scribners), of which *Publishers Weekly* said: "Barnard has mastered the unpredictable, credible plot, and writes with warmth and mellow wit." In August of last year, The Mysterious Press published his *A Talent To Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, with an updated bibliography and filmography by his wife, Louise Barnard. On his last visit to the U.S. from his native England, Mr. Barnard posed for the March 1987 cover of EQMM.

The first runner-up for the 1987 award is Ann Bayer for "A Pleasure To Deal With," the second is John F. Suter for "That Man's Moccasins Have Holes." Mr. Suter is an EQMM veteran (his first story to appear in EQMM was in the September 1953 issue) while Ann Bayer's first three stories in the magazine were all published last year. And that's how it is, as Walter Cronkite has been known to say. To refresh your memory, there are brief summaries of all three winning stories on page 80.

Other stories receiving a substantial vote were Thomas Adcock's "Cracker Jack," Brendan DuBois' "A Ticket Out," Carol Amen's "Last Testament," Helen Nielsen's "Line of Fire," and Edward D. Hoch's "The Problem of the Snowbound Cabin."

Well worth noting is the fact that the excerpts from Heidi Vanderbilt's novel-in-progress about Marta, Sammy, and Ezra, which have received a good deal of controversial mail (as did the Carol Amen reprint), amassed a huge vote of confidence, the ballots carrying such comments as: "Not what I'd usually expect or even want from EQ, but—wow! They stay with you—pain you, haunt you. Thanks to the editors for taking what must have been a bit of a chance on diverging from the usual format," "This searingly human novel-in-progress fascinates me—I cannot get enough of it," "She has really captured the foster parent's dilemma, and the child's feelings ring true to our experiences as foster parents," and "Can't wait to read the ending, which I feel is near." (The answer to this last is that our final excerpt will appear in the August issue.)

Very many thanks to all of you who voted. Your choices and comments are wonderfully edifying.

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THE WOMAN IN THE WARDROBE by Robert Barnard (December 1987)

After his wife's hit-and-run death, headmaster Geoffrey Harcourt finds in the darkest, innermost part of her closet clothes he never knew she owned—bright, sensuous clothes totally unlike the utilitarian things he'd ever seen her wear. In an effort to learn more about this mysterious side of his wife, he goes up to London, where she had been taking a sociology course one evening a week. His investigation leads to a number of painful discoveries, the final one the most horrible of all.

A PLEASURE TO DEAL WITH by Ann Bayer (November 1987)

In early October, a Manhattan woman orders a set of cannisters from a department store, an order which is never filled. In July of the following year, after weeks of phone calls and visits to the credit department at the store, her bill still reflects an unresolved finance charge.

THAT MAN'S MOCCASINS HAVE HOLES by John F. Suter (July 1987)

Churchgoing Calvin Slaughter loaned two thousand dollars over a year earlier to Floyd Amick, a neighbor in need, without asking for a note to cover it. Now their positions are reversed and Cal is in need, but Amick refuses to repay his debt—whereupon Cal employs a most unusual method dealing with his recalcitrant neighbor.

"Q"

Editor's Note: We have just learned that another story by Robert Barnard ("Breakfast Television," January 1987 EQMM) is one of three short stories published last year in EQMM to be nominated for an Edgar by the Mystery Writers of America.

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AN EQMM SPECIAL

The Dallas Morning News *called* Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior *by Judith Martin "as gripping as a mystery." In fact, this national bestseller (available in hardcover from Atheneum and paperback from Warner Books) refers to matters of right and wrong in a way we think worthy of bringing to the attention of such especially concerned citizens as those who read* Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . .

RIGHT AND WRONG

by MISS MANNERS

Urban Neighbors

Good fences may or may not make good neighbors, but shared walls, particularly when the people living on different sides park their electronic equipment against them, do not. Miss Manners would therefore like to spell out some special rules of neighborliness, based on city living.

Urban neighborliness means that one has an obligation to notice disreputable characters who seem to be fooling around with a neighbor's house, and to report them. Urban neighborliness also means that one has an obligation not to notice disreputable characters whom one's neighbor has invited to his house for purposes of fooling around. A person who lives in the city should take in his neighbor's mail and newspaper when requested, so that the house whose tenant is absent will not seem deserted. A person who lives in the city should not take in the papers or magazines of those living in nearby apartments if the owners are merely late risers. Friendly gossip about the neighbors is as much a part of city as country living. It is not, however, friendly to pass on possibly damaging speculations about one's neighbors, particularly if interviewed about them by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Excerpted from MISS MANNERS' GUIDE TO EXCRUCIATINGLY CORRECT BEHAVIOR by Judith Martin. Copyright © 1982 by United Features Syndicate. Used by arrangement with Atheneum Publishers.

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Greater individuality is permitted in the city than in small towns or suburbs. Provided that your hours, your taste in music, and the color you paint your house suit the wishes of the person next door, there should be no conflicts. And if there are, an impartial arbitrator is no farther away than the corner squad car.

Pressing Events

Dear Miss Manners:

Don't you think it's rude the way the press gathers around a house where there has been a gruesome murder? How do you think the family feels?

Gentle Reader:

That is what the members of the press are trying to find out for you.

Guards

Dear Miss Manners:

I invited a very prominent person for dinner—I prefer not to say who. The person arrived with two bodyguards. My question is whether I am expected to feed the bodyguards and, if so, where? In the kitchen or in the dining room? I am afraid this is a very new etiquette problem.

Gentle Reader:

Nothing is new to Miss Manners, who has seen it all. This problem previously existed in the form of personal maids and valets who might or might not accompany guests on house visits. At a good-sized country house, the servants' dining room could always accommodate more, but it was considered polite to inform one's hosts how many people one was bringing along.

Bodyguards, if announced in advance, should be provided supper in any convenient place away from the main party; if not announced, they may be offered whatever refreshment is available in the kitchen. This is perfectly proper, and need not cause you embarrassment when the bodyguard reappears, at your next social function, in the role of fiancé of the lady he was guarding. At that time, one simply moves his place into the dining room.

White in Winter

Dear Miss Manners:

I am a lady who cannot bring myself to wear white shoes before Memorial Day (nor after Labor Day). Fortunately, I am not a nurse.

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The dictum is inscribed within my mind somewhere near "Do not murder." Although I see many women (ah—but I am a "lady," as I noted) sporting this color already, and its allowability would delightfully complement my spring wardrobe, I just can't do it. Am I hopelessly outdated?

Gentle Reader:

Is the law against murder outdated?

Candy

Dear Miss Manners:

How do you take a piece of candy when a box is passed around? How can you tell which are the kind you like? Can you take more than one? Do you take the paper frill it comes in along with the candy, or just the piece of candy?

Gentle Reader:

Of course you know that "Take the one you touched" used to be the first rule of social behavior. Well, it still applies to candy. So does taking one at a time. As for the paper frill, never leave behind evidence of how much you have taken.

Dear Miss Manners:

When you advised a reader to throw away the paper frills that boxed candy comes in, you said, "Never leave behind evidence of how much you have taken." Clearly this means that I must kill the person sitting next to me if he saw me take a piece of candy. Tell me, Miss Manners, what is the proper way to kill another houseguest?

Please rush your answer, as I plan to attend a party in the near future and I may want some candy while I am there.

Gentle Reader:

People are not "evidence," they are "witnesses." Killing witnesses is a dreadful idea. Miss Manners hopes she has caught you in time.

Justified Anger

What does one do with one's justified anger? Miss Manners, who makes a distinction between people and things, will sometimes look the other way if you wish to take out your anger on objects, within the limits of legality. Yet that can be dangerous. A gentleman of Miss Manners' acquaintance who recently kicked a large inanimate object—a Buick—that had offended him, found a large animate object emerging from it to continue the fight . . .

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"Pardon Me"

Dear Miss Manners:

Is it true that "pardon me" is the wrong thing to say—that you have to say "excuse me" instead? Obviously they both mean the same thing and take the same time to say. What's the difference?

Gentle Reader:

A pardon is more difficult to obtain than an excuse. If you don't believe Miss Manners about that, ask some of the prominent and supposedly influential people who have failed or even managed to obtain pardons. For ordinary transgressions, it is easier to ask for an excuse.

A Double Standard

Dear Miss Manners:

I have heard that it is wrong to say "Congratulations" to the bride—that you can say it to the bridegroom, but are supposed to say "Best wishes" to the bride. Why is that?

Gentle Reader:

Because of inequality in the marriage laws.

Dangerous Bags

Dear Miss Manners:

There I'll be, sitting in a bus, maybe reading the paper, maybe just staring ahead, but not making any trouble for anyone, and some woman will hit me in the head with her shoulder bag. Those shoulder bags are a menace. They just swing right along, banging innocent people. What can I do to put such a woman in her place?

Gentle Reader:

No doubt you would consider putting her in your place, or what used to be known as giving a lady a seat, too drastic a measure. Miss Manners presumes that the swinging bag was not intended as a weapon, but that its owner is simply not aware of what is happening. To call it to her attention, you might offer courteously to hold her purse for her. That should send her scurrying to the other end of the bus, clutching it tightly.

Monopoly

Dear Miss Manners:

My mother and my sister and I were playing Monopoly. My sister was going broke and I offered to trade her a hundred dollars and the Water Works for Ventnor Avenue, which I needed to get a set,

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so I could start building. The rest of the property was bought up, so that nobody else had a set, except Mediterranean and Baltic, which don't charge much. Anyway, my sister was about to trade when my mother said to her, "Don't do it, he'll murder us both." Was that fair?

Gentle Reader:

As you play Monopoly, it should be unnecessary for Miss Manners to remind you that life is not fair. Is it fair for a person to bankrupt his dear mother and sister just because they happen to find themselves staying in a hotel they can't afford? You will find, however, that it is in the selfish interest of the rich to keep the poor marginally alive in order to have customers for their marketplace. Therefore, Miss Manners finds it advantageous to you, as well as fair, that your sister be taught basic survival.

A Civil Reunion After a Civil Suit

Dear Miss Manners:

This is going to be a new one, even for you. My wife's ex-husband has invited us "for tea"! You have to understand that this was not a friendly divorce. As a matter of fact, he sued for adultery, after having put detectives on us. We have not spoken in eight years. But now he's remarried and wants to be "civilized." So now comes this invitation, on an engraved "Mr. and Mrs." card. I suppose his wife is curious to meet his ex-wife, and the trouble is, my wife is curious, too, to see his new wife, and wants us to go. How are we supposed to act?

Gentle Reader:

Happy. This is a competition, in which the idea is to show whom fate thought it right to reward, after all. Your job is to look at your wife with the same expression that the detectives caught on your face eight years ago.

Pilfering

Dear Miss Manners:

Several years ago, we had a lovely stay at a hotel on the English Channel somewhere in Kent County, England. The ashtray had a gold coat-of-arms and, as a romantic, I wanted to have it forever. My husband inquired at the desk about purchasing one and we were promptly presented a free, boxed ashtray. A similar vacation was spent in Acapulco, and I wanted several little handmade clay ashtrays. The hotel manager wrapped and boxed several for fifty cents.

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These little silly goodies provide a very special sweep of memories—so if a memento of a special place is important, there is a proper way to obtain it.

Gentle Reader:

In a world where so many people will attempt to justify or conceal the use of petty dishonesty, Miss Manners is delighted to find someone who is using honest means to achieve the effect of pilfering.

Dear Miss Manners:

Who says there is a "right" way of doing things and a "wrong"?

Gentle Reader:

Miss Manners does. You want to make something of it?

"Q"

ON OUR COVER

New York Mets pitcher Ron Darling was born near Worcester, Massachusetts, and grew up there. He is the oldest of Ronald and Luciana Mikina Aikala Darling's four sons, the husband of Irish model Toni O'Reilly, and the father of one-year-old Tyler Christian Darling. Ron attended Yale University and has a master's degree in French Literature from New York University. He lives in Manhattan, where he is co-owner of Champions, a restaurant near City Hall much favored by lawyers, judges, and jurors. Mets catcher Gary Carter calls him Mr. P. (for Perfect, of course).

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first publication in the U.S.

Carla opened the magazine and worked her way down the columns, looking first at the ages of the men who advertised and then, more closely, at the descriptions of any between thirty-five and forty-five. Telling herself she was only playing a game of make-believe, she rejected each of the men who struck her as pushy or fast and eventually penciled a ring around one . . .

FRIENDLY YACHTSMAN, 39

by PETER LOVESEY

Rachel shouted across the room: "Mother, you're pathetic! Mentally you're still in Noddy-land."

Carla felt pathetic. She was on the point of tears. Until this moment she had coped rather well as a single parent—better than others who talked of the teenage rebellion as if World War III had broken out in their homes. Her only daughter, Rachel, had got to fifteen and never thrown a tantrum.

It wasn't that Rachel was repressed. She was a lively, articulate girl with firm opinions. She hadn't needed to vent any frustration because, ever since the divorce, Carla had put her energy and imagination into creating a close, loving relationship between them. They were more like sisters, really, calling each other by first names, sharing experiences. They went to aerobics, played squash, and listened to pop records together.

Of course there was an age gap—Carla was thirty-six—but they conspired to ignore it. If you'd put a gun to Carla's head, she would have admitted that she really preferred Bob Dylan to Madonna, but Rachel never inquired. They made allowances for each other like the best of friends.

Until now. The way Rachel was talking, she plainly wanted to goad Carla into a reaction.

"I don't know why you're staring at me like that."

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"Rachel, this isn't like you."

"What do you know about me, anyway?"

"Darling, we've always been open with each other."

"So what's different? I've told you my plans. I'm not deceitful."

"I didn't say you were," answered Carla, telling herself to stay calm. This was it—the bottled-up agression they had warned her to expect. She found it hard to believe the defiance in her daughter's eyes.

"You're jealous," Rachel said, touching a raw nerve. "Just because you never had the offer of a trip like this, you want to stop me."

"That isn't fair, Rachel."

"Then I can go? Well, I'm going anyway. Try and stop me."

"I haven't even met this boy."

"It isn't just him. There's Cindy, and the other guy, Simon, and it's not the Gobi Desert, for crying out loud. It's only a week in Cornwall."

Carla was silent, more hurt than she wanted to show. She was being forced into the role of the heavy-handed parent while Rachel treated her like a betrayer. And she couldn't deny that there was some envy mingled in with her concern about the wisdom of the trip.

At fifteen, she wouldn't have dared propose such an adventure. Her mother would have had hysterics and her father would have telephoned the school. Her elderly, overprotective parents had practically locked her away until she was nineteen. As a result, when she started work she had married the first man who gave her a kiss and the promise of escape. The marriage had been a disaster.

Well, a disaster in every respect but one. She had Rachel. She didn't want to lose her now.

"All right," she said with a sigh. "I shall have to trust you, won't I?"

Rachel embraced her. "I'm sorry about those mean things I said. You've been a wonderful mother, Carla, and a good mate, too."

That last remark, phrased as it was, like a summing-up, pained Carla more than anything else that had been said. She felt a wrench, and then an ache. She and Rachel would never be as close again.

Over the next week, the ache turned insidiously to something else. Carla resented being left behind. And she resented her own daughter having the freedom that she herself had been denied. Rachel had called her jealous, and she was.

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She tried telling herself that Rachel was entitled to have her independence. A young girl needed friends of her own age. A trip like this was an important stage in the process of growing into a well adjusted modern woman.

All that was true, but where did it leave Carla? What about *her* future, *her* prospect of friends? She'd given her best years to Rachel. At this moment they seemed like lost years. She wished she could have them back.

Envy is a cancerous emotion. It lodged in Carla and spread destructively. She found herself looking at Rachel's fresh skin and the sheen on her young hair and thinking: I was like that, and look at me now.

In the three weeks before Rachel left for the holiday, the tension increased between mother and daughter. And it was all on Carla's side. She knew it was selfish and immature. *She* was behaving like the frustrated teenager. She had to find some way of distracting herself.

She fantasized. If I can't go to Cornwall with Rachel, there's no reason why I shouldn't go on holiday with someone else. Well—it does no harm to think about it.

The envy receded a little. To feed her fantasy, she bought one of those magazines in which lonely people advertise for friends. That night, in the privacy of her room, she poured herself a cherry brandy. Then she opened the magazine and worked her way down the columns, looking first at the ages of the men who advertised and then, more closely, at the descriptions of any between thirty-five and forty-five. Telling herself she was only playing a game of make-believe, Carla rejected each of the men who struck her as pushy or fast and eventually penciled a ring around one:

> FRIENDLY YACHTSMAN, 39, six foot and successful, but shy, seeks blonde, intelligent lady of similar age for weekend sailing trip. Photo appreciated. Box No. 5059.

Carla's mouth had gone dry. She poured another drink and opened the drawer where she kept her photos.

In the next few days, her feelings about Rachel's holiday underwent a change. "I'm starting to get excited for you," she remarked when they went out together to buy a sleeping-bag.

"So long as you don't get depressed when I'm gone," said Rachel.

"I don't think I will now," answered Carla.

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Friendly yachtsman, 39, had replied by return mail. His name was Herb and he was American. He was just amazed that so many charming ladies had responded to his advert, but he liked Carla's letter and photo best and looked forward to meeting her.

Would she allow him to take her to lunch at the Savoy—a chance to meet and talk about the sailing and where they would go, with no commitment yet on either side?

No commitment be damned. Carla bought a tapered black skirt and a snappy black-and-white-check jacket to wear at lunch. She was surprising herself by her single-mindedness. Why not? she thought. Aren't I entitled to some excitement, too?

"Take a long look at me," Herb offered immediately after they met. "See if I measure up to my ad."

Carla smiled, and thought to herself that thirty-nine was a slight underestimate, but he was just as tall as he'd claimed, and tanned as a sailor should be. He had glittering blue eyes, too, and that was an added bonus. She said: "Do I look as if I'm disappointed?"

He said in his soft American accent: "Carla, you look terrific. You know, I had over eighty letters, yet when I saw your picture I said to myself, This is the one."

For most of the lunch he talked about his yacht, a cruising boat harbored at St. Mawes.

"Where's St. Mawes?" asked Carla.

"Cornwall."

Her pulse quickened.

He showed her pictures of the boat's interior, the saloon, and the galley. She'd never set foot inside a yacht, but she could see that this one was luxuriously equipped.

"About the sleeping quarters," said Herb. "You get your own, okay? Just because we happen to be alone on a boat together, I'm not going to be pressing for a heavy relationship or anything."

She liked that. It was the sort of reassurance you got from a mature man. So different from the adolescent pestering that Rachel would have to cope with.

"What should I wear—if you decide to invite me?" asked Carla. "I haven't done this before, you know."

"I'd like to take care of that, if you don't mind," said Herb. "You'll need some special gear. Would you give me some idea of the size you take?"

She presumed he was talking about oilskins, but she hadn't realized that they had to be fitted. She wrote down her measurements.

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"One other thing, Carla. You have beautiful hair. Do you ever wear it loose?"

It was drawn back from her face, coiled, and held in place with a slide. "Sometimes, when I'm indoors. But not when I go out."

"You should. You definitely should."

"It's rather long."

"Have it cut to the level of the shoulders. Say about here." He showed her, and with such obvious interest and concern that she felt amused—and pleased.

She agreed to a short cruise along the Cornish coast the weekend before Rachel returned. Herb explained that he would already be in the West Country on business, so if she drove down he'd meet her on the Friday evening in the public carpark at St. Mawes.

"Is it a large carpark?" Carla asked.

"Relax. It's as quiet as a morgue in the evenings. I'll be the only guy in sight."

She didn't tell Rachel about Herb. When she drove her to the station the following week and left her on the platform with Cindy and the boys, she was able to say "Enjoy yourself" without a twinge of envy.

The same afternoon she went to the hairdresser's.

While the stylist was finishing someone else, Carla picked up a magazine filled with pictures and reports of hunt balls and cocktail parties. She didn't have much interest in the social set, but there was nothing else to read. She'd flicked through as far as the adverts at the back before she had an idea that she'd glimpsed a familiar face in one of the pictures. She took a deep breath and turned back the pages for a second look.

It was one of a set of photos taken at a preview of an art exhibition. Two couples stood holding champagne glasses. The caption read: *Sir Roger and Lady Harkness with Mr. and Mrs. Jack Pearman of New York. Wendy Pearman is managing director of the Trendy Wendy chain of fashion stores.*

It wasn't Trendy Wendy who had caught Carla's attention. It was the tall, suntanned man beside her. Jack Pearman of New York? He was *her* American, Herb. There could be no doubt about it.

Carla closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. Was it so surprising that Herb should have used another name when he advertised? What bothered her more was that he was a married man. To be fair, he hadn't deceived her about that—she simply hadn't liked to ask.

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What now? Her weekend in Cornwall was slipping out of sight. She ought to forget it.

God help me, she thought, I'll be back where I started, pathetically envious of my fifteen-year-old daughter. If I hadn't picked up this magazine, I would never have known. Could I be mistaken about the photograph?

She took another look. It was impossible to imagine him as anyone else but the Herb she knew.

She looked at the wife's picture. Besides being a successful businesswoman, Trendy Wendy was quite good-looking—blonde, with shoulder-length hair. She didn't have the look of a wife who was being deceived.

Strangely, there was something else in her look, something about the proportions of the face, the wide eyes and high cheekbones. Carla stared at the picture. The features were hers! The woman was strikingly like herself.

Was it so remarkable, she rationalized? Presumably Herb was attracted to her cast of face. He'd picked it out from his eighty applications.

The stylist spoke over Carla's shoulder: "How would you like your hair cut today, madam?"

Carla pointed to the picture. "Like this. Shoulder length."

To hell with her doubts. She'd answered the advert in good faith. The prospect of a weekend on the yacht had quite banished her negative feelings toward Rachel. She was going to be positive. After so many years, she was entitled to some high living.

The carpark at St. Mawes was deserted except for two trucks and about a dozen cars. Herb stepped into the beam of her headlights. "You can park it there, beside mine."

His was a Rolls-Royce Silver Spirit.

"I thought we'd eat on the boat," he told her. "Carla, I love your hair like that."

The yacht was the equivalent in sailing craft of the Rolls-Royce. Carla had her own sleeping berth as promised, a cozy cabin with white-leather upholstery and crimson woodwork. Better than a sleeping-bag in a tent. She opened the wardrobe.

"Herb, this is stacked with clothes."

"Sure," he called from the galley. "They're for you. Try the jacket and white pants. See if they fit."

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They fitted perfectly. They were brand new. They had the Trendy Wendy label.

Dinner consisted of steak filet with tomatoes and asparagus tips accompanied by Chateauneuf du Pape, 1979.

"You're a terrific cook," said Carla when they had finished.

"No," said Herb. "Efficient, that's all. To be a terrific cook, you need to be creative. When it comes to creativity, I'm way down the field." He carried the plates to the galley. "And now you'd better get some sleep," he suggested. "The forecast is good, and I'd like to set off on the morning tide."

"Isn't this terrific?" Herb called to Carla when she appeared on deck next morning. The gulls were swooping and wheeling over the shimmering water. "Why don't you sit on the cabin roof and get the feel of the sun on your skin? Did you find that green costume?"

"I'm wearing it," answered Carla, as she slipped the bathrobe from her shoulders.

"Wave to the guys in the fishing boat. They appreciate good looks."

She waved and got an old-fashioned wolf-whistle in return. She felt slightly foolish.

Herb started the engine. He drew Carla's attention to several other spectators as the yacht cruised out of the harbor. "Wave to them."

She had an uneasy feeling that she was being exhibited as the blonde on his boat, so she said: "I'm going below now, to get some breakfast. Can I cook for you?"

Herb said quite sharply: "No. Stay where you are. I have other plans. See the coastguard up there? He's got his glasses on you."

She turned over and lay face down, brooding about the sharpness in his tone of voice. Presently she asked, "Where are we going?"

"Across the Narrows to Falmouth."

"Why?"

"I like it there."

"Aren't we going out to sea?"

"Maybe later."

It seemed to Carla that they'd hardly gone any distance when he anchored in Falmouth, some way off shore, but among other sailing boats. He said: "Now we'll have brunch. No, don't get up. We'll eat on deck."

She said: "If you don't mind, I'd rather sit at a table to eat."

He said casually: "Dangle your legs over the side. Same thing."

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His offhanded manner stung her into remarking: "Is this how you treat your wife?"

He gave her a sharp look. "I didn't say I had a wife."

She said: "You didn't tell me your name is Jack Pearman, either."

The color drained from his face. "How did you know that?"

She told him about the picture in the magazine. "She must be a very able woman, your wife."

"Wendy is the most brilliant lady I've ever met," he said without warmth or pride. "I married her before she was famous, when we were both in art school. She had a genius for design and a cool head for business. I was smart enough to see it."

"Are you in the same business?"

"I turn out a few designs, but I don't have Wendy's talent." There was a hard edge to the words, which he made an effort to soften by adding with a sly grin: "What do I have? I have her Rolls-Royce and her yacht."

"This is *hers*?" Carla said in a shocked voice.

"Don't look so guilty. She's never set foot on it. Won't come near it. She gets seasick."

Carla felt pretty sick herself. She didn't want to stay aboard Wendy Pearman's boat with Wendy Pearman's husband, wearing clothes designed by Wendy Pearman. She demanded to be taken back to St. Mawes.

"No problem," said Herb indifferently. "We'll go back this evening."

"I'd like to go now."

He shook his head. "The tide is wrong."

Carla knew nothing about tides. She had to accept his explanation. He took the yacht out to sea for the afternoon, but it was no pleasure. She was thinking only of getting home.

It was after dark when he finally set her down in St. Mawes. "Too bad it didn't work out," he said. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to sleep on board tonight?"

She put up at a St. Mawes hotel and left early on Sunday morning, still angry with herself for getting involved in such a humiliating experience.

The house was depressingly silent when she let herself in. She turned on the television news while she waited for the kettle to boil. Presently she heard a familiar name and turned and saw a face remarkably like her own on the screen, the blonde hair cut to shoul-

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der-length. Even the jacket and blouse resembled those she had worn aboard the yacht.

The newsman said: "Wendy Pearman, founder of the multi-million Trendy Wendy fashion empire, is missing, believed drowned, after an ocean trip off the south coast of Cornwall in her luxury yacht today. Her husband, Jack Pearman, left her sunbathing on deck while he was at the helm. When he realized she had disappeared, he alerted the coastguard by radio and a search of the area was made, using helicopters and emergency vessels, but nothing was found. Mrs. Pearman was a non-swimmer."

"She also hated boats," said Carla aloud. She switched off the television and poured herself a drink, trying to make sense of the tragedy—if it *were* a tragedy, for she doubted very much whether Wendy Pearman had taken that trip.

She decided not to get involved. If the woman was really dead, nothing could bring her back. But it was a puzzle.

Carla went to bed.

Sometime in the night she woke to the sound of a door being closed and knew someone was in the house! The stairs creaked. Footsteps crossed the landing.

Carla's heart was pounding. The bedroom door opened.

"Are you awake?"

Carla felt for the light switch. "Rachel! What's happened? Why are you here?"

Rachel reached out and clasped her mother, pressing her face into her shoulder. Her eyes were moist. "It was horrible. I'm so glad to find you here."

"Darling, what is it? Tell me."

"I left the others and came home."

"Oh, Rachel—why?"

"Something really hateful happened. Someone came to the campsite and told us that some pot-holers had found a dead body in an old mineshaft. The two boys wanted to see it brought to the surface. I told them I didn't want to go, but— It was a woman. She was blonde. The blanket slipped off her face and I saw her and, oh, Carla, she looked like you. They said she must have fallen down there sometime before the weekend. They don't know who she is."

"But I do," said Carla. She reached for the phone and began dialing for the emergency-services operator.

"Carla, why did you cut your hair?"

She didn't answer. She was already talking to the operator . . .

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After Carla had spent the morning at the police station making a statement, she met Rachel and told her why she had cut her hair. She told her everything.

Rachel was silent for a long time. Then she said: "So the dead woman I saw was Wendy Pearman?"

"Yes."

"And her husband pushed her down the mineshaft?"

Carla nodded. "Some days ago. He'd planned it for a long time. He advertised for a blonde, knowing he could take his pick from all the photos. I must have been the closest to her in looks, so after he'd murdered Wendy he dressed me in her clothes and paraded me on his yacht to convince people that she was still alive. Thanks to that picture in the hairdresser's I knew who he was. After I left, he faked the accident at sea to account for her disappearance."

Rachel frowned. "Why did he kill her?"

"She had all the talent."

"Exactly! He needed her. He could have carried on living like a king. What made him do it?"

"Envy."

"But that's unreasonable."

"Yes," said Carla. "And deadly."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

ANDREW KLAVAN

Margaret sat in the living room, knitting. She stared over the tops of the clicking needles. Her lips were pressed together tightly. I will not permit it, she thought. He promised it was the last time.

Andrew Klavan is the winner of the 1984 Edgar Award for best paperback original. He is currently working on a line of detective novels Bantam Books will begin publishing this spring. His work has appeared or is scheduled to appear in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, *and* The Village Voice . . .

THE LAST TIME

by ANDREW KLAVAN

It was happening again. She was sure of it. Tim came back to the apartment late that Thursday. Not very late. Just late enough. "Sorry, darling, something came up," he mumbled. He never took his eyes off the floor. She knew on the instant.

He headed straight for the bathroom: another sign. He showered for nearly twenty minutes. Checking himself for stray hairs and lipstick stains, no doubt; sniffing at himself to make sure every trace of perfume was washed away.

Margaret sat in the living room, knitting. She stared over the tops of the clicking needles. Her lips were pressed together tightly. I will not permit it, she thought. He promised it was the last time.

She had no trouble finding out who it was. She knew it would be someone young, first of all. Someone blonde. Someone accessible, but not so close as to cause trouble when it was over. She knew they wouldn't meet after work too often. Tim wouldn't want Margaret to

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become suspicious. Not after the row she'd made. Not after he'd promised. No, for the most part, they would use the lunch hour. Tim was an account executive at an advertising firm and took long lunches. For the most part, it would be then.

Around noon on the Monday next, she planted herself on the corner of Madison Avenue and Forty-sixth Street, across from the stately old office tower which housed Tim's firm, and waited. She didn't disguise herself or hide behind a newspaper, or anything like that. She wasn't some sleazy private detective, after all. She simply stood and watched the entrance. She trusted the Manhattan lunch-hour crowds to hide her well enough.

Her husband came out at around twelve-thirty and headed north up Madison. Margaret followed. At Fifty-first Street, he turned east, leading her away from the avenue. She kept a safe distance, but there was really nothing to worry about—he was walking quickly, intently, without looking back. He made his way past the mobs of gold-coast lawyers on Park into the throngs of shoppers on Lexington and then to the rows of elegant brownstones between Second and First. One of the brownstones—a fine one, decorated with medallion reliefs, crowned with an exquisitely crafted cornice—was his destination.

Margaret hung back and watched him go in. She crossed the street and stared up at the building. The light in the third-floor window was the only one on. As she watched, Margaret caught the brief sweep of a fan of golden hair behind the pane: the eager lover rushing to the door.

She went into the vestibule and checked the name on the mailbox. Nora Wilkins. It seemed to her there'd been a Nora once before. There'll be no more of them, she thought as she walked away. I'm putting a stop to it here and now. This is the last time.

That night, when Nora Wilkins returned home from whatever ridiculous glamor job it was she held, Margaret was waiting for her. Margaret was a firm, no-nonsense sort—she'd made up her mind and she was going to act. But even she quailed a little at the sight of the girl. Nora was more than beautiful. She was nearly perfect—tall and thin, with gently rounded hips and high breasts that made her spring blouse shiver as she walked. Her face was delicate and sweet, her hair long and shiny and richly gold. Seeing her, Margaret had to summon up an extra measure of courage before she stepped out of the first evening shadows to confront her.

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"Miss Wilkins," she said. The girl stopped, puzzled. "My name is Margaret Cade. I'm—"

"I know who you are," Nora said. And archly: "Tim has told me about you."

Her composure took Margaret aback, but she pushed on. "Then you know why I'm here."

Nora eyed the small, prim older woman before her with unmistakable distaste. "Yes," she said with a sigh. "But let's not do this in the street, okay?"

Margaret nodded and followed her into the building.

Upstairs, Margaret waited silently while Nora opened her apartment door. They came into a brightly decorated living room. The angular metal furniture, the posters on the wall—everything struck Margaret with its youthfulness. She stood in the center of the room, feeling dowdy and tired with her brown-grey hair tied up in back, her navy-blue jacket buttoned almost to the neck.

Nora plopped onto a sofa: peach pillows on a shiny metal frame. She stretched her shapely legs out before her. "I didn't think you'd try something like this," she said. "Why would you humiliate yourself?"

Margaret answered quietly, "You'd be surprised at the lengths one goes to. I hope you never have to learn."

Nora shrugged. "I guess it's different for someone your age."

"I suppose so." There was silence after that. In the face of such arrogance, such coldness, such—cruelty was the only word for it—Margaret could think of nothing to say. She felt her resolve melting within her.

"Lookit," said Nora. "Tim's a grown man. He knows what he wants, what he needs. If you can't handle that, leave him. There's no law saying you have to stay."

"Isn't there?" said Margaret.

"Well—" Nora gave that infuriating shrug again "—what can I tell you? We all make choices in this life, Mrs. Cade."

"Yes," Margaret said, trying to keep her voice from trembling with anger. "And I can see you've made yours. Excuse me for bothering you."

She turned, left the apartment, and hurried down the stairs. In another moment, she was walking toward Second Avenue, wobbling unsteadily on her low heels. One word echoed through her mind over and over: *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. Her eyes were glazed, her lips white with the force of her rage . . .

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On Friday, she gathered what she needed.

There was a length of rope in the kitchen broom closet. There were reinforced garbage bags under the sink. The butcher knife was hanging above the stove, but it took her a while to find the hacksaw. Tim had been using it and it was in a drawer of his desk. Margaret put the things in a tote bag and zipped it shut. This is it. This is really it, she kept thinking.

She took out her knitting and sat with it in the easy chair by the phone.

It was quarter past six when the call came.

"I'll be—a little late this evening. Sorry, darling." Tim was mumbling again. His voice fairly dripped with guilt. "We have to redo an account. It came up suddenly. I—"

She forced herself to smile brightly. "That's all right," she cooed into the mouthpiece. "I have plenty to do."

This is it, she thought as she hung up the phone. This is the last time.

She waited until full dark, then took a cab to Grand Central terminal. There, she took the subway up to Lexington and Fifty-first. She walked from there, gripping the strap of her tote bag in her right hand.

This time, the lights in the third-floor window of the elegant brownstone were the only ones that were *not* on. Margaret walked into the vestibule and pressed the button next to Nora's name. There was a long pause before Tim's voice came over the speaker. "—Who is it?"

"It's your wife," Margaret said. The quiet firmness of her voice surprised her.

There was another long pause. Then the buzzer went off and the latch of the front door snapped open. Margaret pushed inside.

She carried the tote bag upstairs. When she stood before Nora's door, she shifted her grip on the strap, making sure it was secure. She reached for the doorbell, but Tim cracked the door open before she could ring. The look of terror and confusion in his eyes almost made her feel sorry for him.

"Margaret," he said, "I—"

She pushed the door in, brushed past him into the darkened room. "Turn on the light," she commanded.

Tim did. Nora was on the floor, her beautiful body bruised and

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mottled now, her face bloated and disfigured. The stocking was tied around her neck so tightly it was nearly buried in her flesh.

As Margaret stood staring, Tim shuffled up behind her. "Please," he whispered meekly, "please. You have to help me. I don't know what to do."

Margaret set the tote bag down on the floor and began to roll up her sleeves.

"Oh, all right," she said angrily. "But this is *absolutely the last time.*"

DETECTIVERSE

BRINGING PRESSURE TO BEAR

by RUBY HORANSKY

A jealous young woman named Beth
Swore she'd strangle her husband to death,
For she knew that he'd strayed
And she'd see that he paid—
How she laughed as he took his last breath!

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"We're not divorced, only separated," Pearse told Jellicoe. "Still beneficiaries of each other's will. Then this good fortune came my way. I'm free to write what I want."

"Which is?"

"I didn't know until I looked at you. Now I think I have the idea. It'll be about men who are losers. Because they prefer to be. Don't be offended, there'll be a lot of me in the story as well . . ."

LOSERS

by WILLIAM BANKIER

It sounded like a fight about to start in the garden of The King's Head. Jim Pearse wondered what was happening. The time was eleven-fifteen in the morning. He was in his favorite chair on Sussex Lane, under the canopy, with a good view of the pathway along the vine-clad brick wall of the old pub.

"Keep moving." Eddie Groom, the publican, was a solid man, respectable in his tweed jacket, but tough. Years ago, he had been a boxer and was notorious for butting his opponents. He was escorting a blond young drifter in drab garments that exposed patches of weathered skin.

"Shift me," the drifter said in a provocative tone. "Go on, shift me." He went ahead into the middle of Sussex Lane. The publican remained on his property, signaling the lad's next move with an overarm gesture in the direction of a street market.

Pearse was fascinated by the drifter's face. It was ugly-pretty. The blue eyes were widely spaced. He had a perfect mouth, dragged down now in an exaggerated frown, but the nose influenced all his other features—it was an extreme pug, pushed up so far that the nostrils

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faced forward. Pearse considered jotting down in his notebook a few sentences describing the young man. A nice touch was the paperback book stuffed into a pocket of his ragged jacket.

As the drifter moved away, the pub owner relaxed. "I don't mind them sleeping in my garden," he said, "but I'd like them gone by opening time. And without an argument."

"He was trying to get you to put your hands on him," Pearse suggested.

"He wouldn't have liked it." Groom headed inside.

Pearse was feeling excited. The sensation was rare these days. The extra money coming in so unexpectedly had set him free. But it was a struggle getting hold of a project that would justify him to Madge—and to himself.

Now here was something to write about. His main character had walked onstage, full of charm and contradiction. Pearse had to know more.

He swallowed the remains of his pint and left the pub. Holding his notebook to his chest like a monk carrying a Bible, Pearse pursued the drifter, who was disappearing between the stalls of the market.

The young man was handling nectarines when Pearse approached. The stall-owner was about to intervene. Pearse spoke in a comradely way. "First the publican shifts you. Now this gentleman is about to ask you for money. Would you allow me to buy you some fruit?"

"Why not? Buy me three of these and a couple of the anjou pears. Then we'll go to the bakery and you can buy me chelsea buns. And I wouldn't say no to a tin of beer."

Pearse carried the food, following the drifter with his six-pack of lager across the Bayswater Road and into Kensington Gardens. He had said his name was Henry Jellicoe. It sounded too good to be true. He looked more like an Alf. Pearse let the boy seek out a bench. He was lean but muscular, like a stray cat the writer had fed for a time before he and Madge separated.

Jellicoe found a bench with plenty of space around it. He popped two tins of beer while Pearse arranged buns and fruit between them. They found it easy to talk, although the age differential was a good twenty-five years. Jellicoe said he was from the East End. He was born in 1960. His father had fought through North Africa and Italy with the Eighth Army. Then he discovered the old man in the

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kitchen with his head in the gas oven one morning when he was eleven years old. His mother had died five years before.

"That's rough," Pearse said. He finished his beer and reached for another. "How did she die?"

"Too horrible to tell you. Maybe I will someday."

Pearse responded with parts of his own story. "I used to write advertising," he said. "Then I discovered I could produce romance novels. Those things the ladies read? I turn out three a year. I have a pseudonym. You are drinking beer with Amelia Hanniford."

Jellicoe hugged his knees and rocked. "I love it." Then he asked the intelligent question. "Aren't you frustrated, not seeing your name in print?"

"I wouldn't want my name associated with these books. But I've had a stroke of luck. Every novel Amelia ever wrote is being reprinted and issued in America. It's a cash windfall, enough to let me spend a year or two writing a book of my own."

The food was gone, the six-pack reduced to crumpled tins on the grass. Pearse saw the time was almost two o'clock. "If we go across the road," he said, "we can get in an hour at the pub before they close."

"Not the one I was turfed out of this morning," Jellicoe said, slipping bare arms inside his jacket. The paperback fell behind the bench. Pearse retrieved it.

"Shift me, shift me," he mimicked, following his companion's rangy stride across the sun-dappled lawn and out of the park.

They drank fast in the final hour at The Hunter's Horn. Pearse had not felt so relaxed in years. He opened up about Madge. "We met when I was in advertising. She catered an office party. I helped her clean up after and took her home. We got married a year later. She kept working. We never had kids. When I quit my job to write the romances, she thought it would be exciting. But it wasn't. There's no glory. You can only scribble a certain number of hours a day. So even though I was producing the things flat out, I still had all kinds of time to vegetate. It ticked her off, me around the place, bitching because I'm not P. G. Wodehouse."

"So she left you."

"Other way around. It was her flat. She kicked me out and I came here to live on the wrong side of the park. We're not divorced, only separated. Still beneficiaries of each other's will. Then this good fortune came my way. I'm free to write what I want."

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"Which is?"

"I didn't know until I looked at you. Now I think I have the idea. It'll be about men who are losers. Because they prefer to be. Don't be offended, there'll be a lot of me in the story as well."

The bell rang for last orders. Pearse went to the bar with the empty glasses and got them filled. When he returned to their bench, Jellicoe said, "And how much is this windfall, then?"

"Forty thousand quid."

The young man hung his head and sucked a tooth. Then he said, "And where is Madge these days?"

"In Brighton. She took off from London last year—answered an ad for somebody to be hostess at a restaurant down there. She got the job. Madge gets most of what she tries for."

"You sound as if you miss her."

"We were good together for a long time. Yes, if I think about it, I don't like Madge down there with that cruiserweight."

"Who?"

"The owner of the restaurant. Neville Botsford. He's some sort of terror on the coast. Fixes horse races and handles stolen goods but manages to be a pillar of the community. I only met him once. It was enough."

The bell rang again. The drinkers would soon be outside on the pavement. Jellicoe said, "You should go there and see her if you miss her."

"I'm due next weekend. Madge wants to advise me on the money. She doesn't want me living off it while I write this book."

"She's sorry now she got rid of you, you with your forty grand."

Outside, squinting into the sun which was getting down behind the plane trees in the park, Jellicoe said, "You should nip down and see the lady right now."

"Should I?"

"When she isn't expecting you. Catch her at it." The young drifter closed one blue eye. "Give you a bit of leverage in the relationship."

"Madge can make mincemeat out of me. She's going to talk that money right into our joint account."

"I'll give you support," Jellicoe said.

Pearse needed only a moment to make up his mind. "All right, we'll go together. She's got Botsford, and now I've got you."

They rode a taxi to Victoria Station, where Pearse paid for two tickets to Brighton. The canteen was open three carriages forward.

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Pearse bought four tins of lager. They found an empty compartment and drank slowly as Clapham Junction came and went, and East Croydon, and the ghostly shapes of airplanes at Gatwick.

"What would she have you do with your money?" Jellicoe's stare was bleary. There was moisture on the pouches under his eyes.

"Real estate. Buy a flat. It can only increase in value."

"She's right about that."

"But I'm nearly fifty. And we all die." Pearse enjoyed a feeling of bravado. "I want my chance to produce some work that will live on after I'm gone."

Jellicoe said, "People scrimp to provide for their old age. Then Fate steps in and they don't get any old age."

"Fate has a sense of humor." Pearse acknowledged the risk. "You blow your savings and She lets you live."

Leaving Brighton Station at half past six, they were able to walk to The Sea Lion where Madge worked. It was getting dark and cool. Jellicoe found a sweater in his pack, struggled into it, and put his jacket back on over it. He looked less disreputable with the sunburned chest covered up.

Pearse led the way down the hill. The grey mass of the Channel seemed to draw them forward. White buildings were beginning to back off into the night.

"You promised to tell me about your mother," Pearse said as they waited at a traffic light.

"She died horribly," Jellicoe said. "A wasp stung her inside the mouth. She choked to death in front of me. I was six years old."

Pearse looked for pain in the drifter's eyes but saw only determination. "Now I know you're a bloody liar."

"Why?"

"Because that is exactly what happened to Ken Halliwell's parents. The wasp. The gas oven."

"Halliwell?"

"Don't pretend dumb. Joe Orton's friend. The playwright—*Loot, Entertaining Mr. Sloane.* I read his biography. The same book that fell out of your jacket in the park."

After a pause, Jellicoe grinned and said, "It's a better story than mine."

"Let me be the judge of that," Pearse told him. "If you ever decide to speak the truth."

The Sea Lion had once been a proud bungalow halfway up a slope

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on the ocean front. From its broad steps there was a clear view of the beach. Neville Botsford lived upstairs and Madge Pearse supervised a warren of dining areas on the ground floor. On this quiet evening, it was easy for the writer to smuggle his scruffy companion inside and hide him at one of the tables off the main room.

The hostess hurried in from the bar with menus. "The other room would be warmer— Oh, it's you." She spoke to her husband but her eyes were on the younger man. Madge Pearse was refusing to wear at least fifteen of her forty-six years. Her face was plump and firm. Thick-framed glasses rode atop a scroll of mahogany hair. A short skirt made the most of smooth, tapered legs.

"We came down to explain about the money," Pearse said. "This is my friend, Henry."

"Your friend Henry is not properly dressed."

"Shall I take off my clothes, then?" Henry said.

Madge's blush erased a few more years. "You may as well eat, now you're here."

They ate soup and salmon and apple cobbler and drank two bottles of Soave. The bar was visible through fake vines on a trellis. Madge could be seen in conversation with a tall, bald man in a maroon blazer. "That's Neville Botsford," Pearse murmured. "They say he once killed a man. Would you believe it?"

Jellicoe squinted across a forkful of fish. "What's he doing out of prison?"

"They couldn't prove it. Never found the body. But according to Madge, those who know him say it's true. Now he's got the finest reputation money can buy."

Madge arrived after the coffee and brandy were served. She drew up a chair and sat down, crossing her legs in Jellicoe's direction. "Is this how you intend to dissipate your forty thousand?" she said, casting her eyes over the remains of the feast.

Pearse said, "The idea for my novel came to me soon after I encountered young Jellicoe. The outline is maturing in my mind even as we speak."

"But you'll continue to write your romances."

"Not really. I intend to devote my total effort to the new project for at least two years. The windfall money will see me through." Pearse knocked back his brandy. In these surroundings of oak and brass, with the timeless ocean out there in the dark behind the

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diamond window panes, he felt omnipotent. "The unexpected income is a divine signal. I am meant to do this."

"Who's encouraging you? Is it this one?" She brought the glasses down from her hair and gave Jellicoe an owl-like frown.

"Henry thinks I'm right to have a go."

"My guess is Henry wants to rip you off."

Jellicoe said, "May Henry speak? You two are about to continue a long-established battle. Leave me out of it, please."

"You're in it, mate," Pearse said warmly.

"Not if I have anything to say." Madge's voice rang in the empty restaurant. Beyond the trellis, Botsford lifted his shining head.

To pay the bill, Pearse and Jellicoe followed Madge into the bar where Neville Botsford waited behind his cash desk. He remembered Madge's husband from an earlier visit. When he was introduced to Jellicoe, the owner made no attempt to hide his disapproval. He ignored the drifter's outstretched hand.

"Everything all right?" he asked as he made change. He meant the meal.

"All wrong, actually," Madge said. "Jim has an opportunity to lay down a little security for his old age, but he's determined to blow it."

"What's so enviable about old age?" Jellicoe lounged against the counter. "You lot are nearly there. Surely you can see how disgusting it is."

Botsford's fists rested like a lion's paws on either side of his cash register. He said, "Don't flaunt yourself, my son. You may not make it past tonight."

Madge jumped in. "You've had your meal and paid your bill. Now why don't you get out?"

Pearse and Jellicoe were on the restaurant steps, facing a chilly wind off the sea. Madge hurried out after them and stood hugging herself in her thin blouse. "I'm sorry I was rude—but you mustn't confront Neville." The men both started laughing. "I see it's no use trying to talk to you tonight," she said. "Have you got a place to stay? You're welcome to kip at my flat."

"Thanks," Pearse said, "but we'll find a bed-and-breakfast."

"Come and see me in the morning. When you're sober and can talk sense."

As they moved away, Jellicoe called back to her. "I was equally rude. I'm sorry."

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"No need to apologize," Madge said with a lift in her voice. "We make allowances for the young."

Pearse led the way down the slope and through The Lanes. "That's Madge's flat," he said, pointing out a wooden doorway painted pale green with a large number 9 on it.

They found a tourist home. It was a modernized structure on the coast road. Pearse paid for a room with twin beds. It contained bagged glasses, labeled soap, a paper strip across the sanitized toilet, and there was a plastic identification tag on the key. The writer referred to these as Americanisms and bemoaned the arrival in England of motel accommodation. He collapsed on his bed, too weary to undress himself.

"She's involved with Botsford," Jellicoe said. "I hope you don't mind."

"You saying it, or her doing it?"

"Stick to your guns tomorrow or she'll have that money off you."

"I'm beginning to see it her way. Maybe I should invest it. There's no guarantee I'll ever write a proper book."

"You're depressed from the booze."

Pearse slept in his clothes. During the night, he woke and raised his head. The other bed was empty. Assuming his companion was in the bathroom, he lay back down and closed his eyes.

Somebody was knocking on the door. Pearse sat up in daylight. The knocking was repeated, insistently. "All right, I'm coming!" he called.

The man outside the door was wearing a raincoat and a brown hat. He said he was Sergeant Wheat of the Brighton Police. He asked if he could come in. Pearse opened the door wider and closed it behind the visitor. "What's happened?"

"Are you traveling on your own, sir?"

"No. My companion must have gone out."

"When did you last see him?"

"Before I went to sleep. Around eleven."

Sergeant Wheat took a key from his pocket. He showed the numbered tag to Pearse. "Is this your room key?"

"Or a duplicate. Where did you get it?"

"I'm afraid there's been a murder. Your friend's body was found on the beach this morning. The key was in his pocket. He'd been killed during the night. —Several blows to the head." Wheat studied

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Pearse's face. "Plenty of stones on the beach. The murder weapon was probably thrown far out to sea."

Pearse sat down on the bed. "I hope you don't think I had anything to do with it."

"No, sir." The policeman seemed to be enjoying himself. "We know his type. They're promiscuous. Picked you up in London, did he? You fancy the young ones?"

"Nothing like that." Pearse felt anger rising but he was afraid to show it.

"He must have gone cruising and ran into some rough trade." Wheat tossed the key on the dresser. "I reckon he got what he was looking for."

When the policeman went to the door, Pearse said, "Will I have to appear? I intended going back to London today."

"Feel free," Wheat said. "I've taken your address from the motel register. If we have to talk to you we know where to find you."

Pearse went to see Madge at her flat in The Lanes. She made him coffee while he told her about the murder. "His bedroll and the few things he was carrying are gone from the room," he concluded.

"He'd given up on you," Madge suggested. "He hoped he could tap into your money. When you said you intend to take my advice, he saw he was wasting his time."

"It doesn't feel right."

"What doesn't?"

"The cop was strange. He hardly seemed to care. As if he'd only come to return the key."

"Brighton policemen are like that. This isn't London."

"Besides, I never thought Jellicoe was gay. Can't two men spend time together without it being a sexual thing?"

"You're so naive, Jim. I spotted it as soon as I saw the pair of you. You could cut it with a knife."

Pearse shook his head. "But random killing—it's too coincidental." He found himself staring at a framed photo of Madge and Neville cheek-to-cheek on a dance floor. "What about Botsford?"

Madge sipped her coffee. "Did Neville have cause?"

"Henry gave him lip last night. He didn't like it. If Henry went back there later—"

"Neville is lethal," Madge admitted. "He's also careful. We may never know."

Madge talked about investing Pearse's windfall. She had been

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looking at a cottage on the road to Hove. It needed work done, but it was a jewel. Pearse's forty thousand along with ten she had saved would make the down-payment. Her wages and his income from further romance novels would easily meet the mortgage payments and all other living expenses.

"You could get on with your writing in a quiet setting. And the property would keep appreciating in value." She gave him a thoughtful stare. "We're neither of us getting any younger."

"You expect me to move down here?"

"It's one of the options I've been considering."

"Forget it. I'll never leave London."

"I can't go back there and be with you. Much as I'd like to."

"Are you playing with me?"

"You're my only true love, Jimmy. But Nev won't let me go."

She persuaded him to come and see the cottage. They went outside to where her car was parked. She was behind the wheel and belted in when the sun broke through. "I've left my sunglasses on the table beside the sofa," she said.

Pearse took her key and ran back to the green door, letting himself in and mounting the inside stairs two at a time. Madge was not a tidy housekeeper—the sunglasses were hard to find. He had to shift newspapers and articles of clothing to discover them, at last, under a cushion. That was when he noticed Henry Jellicoe's paperback.

There was no question about it. It was a biography of Joe Orton, the same battered copy he had seen fall to the grass in Kensington Gardens. He recognized a torn corner on the cover. It was hard to take it in. Jellicoe must have been here during the night. Before he got killed. Why? Or perhaps the killer—Botsford?—had brought the book back here.

The cottage was everything Madge had promised. If you wanted to live in Nineteenth Century discomfort and go mad from boredom within sight of the sea, this was the ideal place. Pearse said as much. He was frightened and angry because of what was going on. Jellicoe was by no means a bosom buddy, but he was a free spirit and fun to be with. It was putting it mildly, Pearse realized, to say he was unhappy over his murder. If Madge was involved, he wanted to know why.

"Never mind cottages," he said as they got back into the car. "Let's talk about Henry Jellicoe. And what he was doing in your flat last night."

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"Say what?"

Pearse took the paperback from his pocket. "Henry was carrying this all day yesterday. I found it earlier beside your settee."

Her sunglasses were a mask. "All right," she said, "he arrived in the middle of the night. I was asleep. You must have shown him my front door."

"That's right."

"He'd been to see Neville. He wanted work at The Sea Lion. I told him the middle of the night was a crazy time to go job-hunting. But it seems your friend was impetuous. And he thought he could do things for Neville. And get paid."

"I'm not buying this."

"Neville insulted him. I believe he ended up throwing him out bodily. Then Jellicoe came to me. He was boiling mad. I tried to calm him down. And then he left."

"To get murdered on the beach."

Madge said, "I'm scared, I need a drink. Come back to my place."

Pearse followed his wife upstairs and accepted a glass of whiskey. "We'd better go to the police. Tell them about Botsford. He got away with murder before. This time he didn't even bother to hide the body."

"It's no good," she said. "He's above the law."

"Like hell."

"He is! He pays off people in high places. He's into gambling, into selling drugs. They'll never touch him."

"So he kills my friend and walks away?"

Madge topped his drink. "Unless you do something about it."

"What chance would I have against him?"

"More than you think. I have a gun." She opened a drawer in the telephone table and took out an automatic. Seeing the uncomprehending way Pearse stared at the weapon, she said, "It's loaded. Neville provided it for my protection. But he doesn't see you as a threat. I can tell you where he is right now. In the back room of the restaurant, with the books. You can walk right in."

"Then what? I just leave town?"

"Nobody knows you're here," Madge said.

"Somebody does. That policeman interviewed me this morning at the motel, remember?"

Madge slipped the gun into Pearse's pocket. "Sergeant Wheat," she said, "has no reason to connect your friend's death with Ne-

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ville's." She led him to the door. "Don't call me until you're back in London."

In the doorway, he said, "Can I do this?"

She kissed him. It was almost like the old days. "Nev terrorizes me. I'd like to be free of him. I could come back to London and get a job and look after you. While you write your book."

The wind off the sea was brisk as Pearse walked up the slope toward The Sea Lion. His courage was wearing off with the alcohol. And something nagged at his mind. Something Madge had said. Her insistence that she still loved him might or might not be true. But there was something else. He was aproaching the steps of the restaurant when the pieces fell into place. Without breaking stride, he turned and made his way back down the hill. A cab was passing. He hailed it and asked to be driven to the station.

Nothing was as it seemed. He remembered telling Madge about the interrogation at the motel, mentioning only a policeman. But minutes ago, as she gave him the gun, she had referred to the officer as Sergeant Wheat.

To confirm his suspicion, Pearse went into the men's room as soon as he arrived at the station. There, in the privacy of a cubicle, he took out the pistol, fumbling with it until he managed to extract the magazine. Madge had told him it was loaded. But she had given him an empty gun.

The Brighton train arrived in Victoria just after two. Pearse hurried through tunnels to the Underground station, traveled to Lancaster Gate, and walked from there to The King's Head, arriving just in time for last orders. He nursed a pint at the bar, telling Eddie Groom about Jellicoe's fate. "You won't be bothered by him any more," he said.

"I never wished him luck as bad as that," the publican said. Pearse rambled on as the saloon bar emptied after three o'clock. He needed to unload, and Groom was a good listener. He talked about Madge and her relationship with Botsford. Groom raised his eyebrows—the name Botsford was familiar to him. Pearse went on to say he would be concentrating for the next couple of years on his novel now he had the money.

Groom said, "Wouldn't you be wiser to put it in real estate?"

"That's what my wife keeps telling me."

"If your wife has connections with Botsford, she's a clever lady,"

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Groom told him. "People go to great lengths to become friendly with that man."

Safely hidden away in his apartment with his notebooks and his typewriter and countless copies of old manuscripts, Pearse dialed Madge's number in Brighton. She came on the line instantly. "You must be surprised it's me," he said.

"Where are you?"

"Where I belong. Not confronting your friend with an empty gun."

"I found the clip an hour ago!" she said. "Nev must have unloaded it so there wouldn't be an accident. I'm so relieved you checked it before you went there."

"That's the story, is it, Madge?"

"What do you mean?"

"I told you a policeman interviewed me. You called him Sergeant Wheat. Which happens to be his name. How the hell did you know?"

"You must have mentioned it."

Pearse's heart was pounding. "I'm only sorry for poor Henry Jellicoe. He looked rough, but he was really a lamb. And I led him to the slaughter."

Pearse made himself drunk before he lay down to sleep. The events of yesterday and today whirled inside his head—Henry's proud voice saying "Shift me!" Botsford frowning behind the bar. Madge hinting that their relationship wasn't over, that the door was still open. Once upon a time there had been pleasure when they let themselves go.

But she had sent him to get killed. Was it Botsford's idea, because Pearse might decide to connect him with Jellicoe's murder? Or was Madge telling the truth about the missing cartridge magazine?

He opened his eyes and knew someone was in the apartment. There must have been a sound. His mouth was dry. The illuminated bedside clock gave the time as half past two.

Somebody was being careful in the living room—somebody who was not familiar with the layout. Papers slid from the coffee table. Pearse rolled from his mattress onto the carpet. He needed a weapon. Madge's automatic came to hand. It had no bullets, but gripped by the barrel it would do as a cosh.

There was another way into the living room, unknown to the intruder. Silently, breathing through his mouth, Pearse crept through the kitchenette, attaining a position where he could see a

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crouching figure silhouetted against pale light from the front window. Best not to think. He eased forward, raising the gun and clubbing it down on the man's head. It was a glancing blow. The man caught his wrist. Pearse panicked. He used his knees, the gun, his other fist. He was making ugly noises in his throat.

Henry Jellicoe said, "Dammit, Jimmy, let me up."

Pearse stopped hitting and sat back. He switched on a lamp, noticing blood on his knuckles. Jellicoe was on his side—his nose was bleeding.

"You'd like an explanation," he said.

"I'd like an axe. You're lucky I don't have one."

"Wait'll you hear what she wanted me to do. She's a witch. She persuaded me to come here and kill you."

Pearse assessed his feelings. He was on the floor in the middle of the night. He had just won a fight with a younger man. His blood was up. "I think you're lying, Henry. Like Madge lied to me in Brighton. You intended to kill me, but the idea is yours."

"Hers and mine. I'll concede a partnership."

"What happened? You only met her yesterday."

"How long does it take? The best plans are made quickly."

Pearse rested the gun across his wrist and sighted down the barrel with one eye closed. His target was the middle of the drifter's face.

Jellicoe grinned. "You're way out of character, mate."

"The idea was to fake your murder on the beach and hope I cared enough to go and confront Botsford—who seems to have police immunity. He would probably have killed me on the spot. When that plan didn't succeed, you came up here to take care of me."

"More or less correct."

"Who is Sergeant Wheat when he isn't impersonating an officer?"

"Pastry chef at The Sea Lion." Jellicoe struggled to his feet. He wiped his bloody nose on his sleeve. "You're a tiger in a fight," he said.

"Stay where you are," Pearse ordered. "I'm getting the police on you for this."

"For what? I'm the injured party. You haven't lost anything. I didn't even damage your front door when I opened it."

"Stand still, Henry!"

Jellicoe turned and pointed a finger. "Bang, you're dead," he said. "Now it's your turn. I happen to know that's Madge's gun. And the magazine is empty."

Pearse pulled the trigger just to hear the sound. The gun roared.

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Jellicoe was knocked against the wall. He sank to the floor, his eyes glazed, blood staining his shirt. He was dead by the time Pearse crossed the room and knelt beside him.

Now there would have to be police. How could he explain the loaded gun? Madge would have to help—it was her fault! Trembling now, Pearse went to the telephone.

Madge picked up the phone without turning on the bedside light. She listened to her husband's panicky explanation. "There must have been one in the chamber," she said. "I know Neville emptied the magazine." She listened further. "Calm down," she said at last. "I'll get Nev to come up and take care of things. He knows what to do. Don't call the police. Just sit tight. He'll be with you in a couple of hours."

She put down the telephone. Beside her in the dark, Neville Botsford said, "Now what?"

"The wrong one was killed." Madge let the silence build. "You've got to do him, Nev. It's forty thousand quid."

Botsford sighed. "Easy for you to say. I'm the one has to drive all the way up to London. In the rain."

Pearse drank two cups of black coffee while he reviewed the situation. Why should Neville Botsford come from Brighton to help him shift a dead body? Because Pearse couldn't handle it alone and if he called the police, Botsford's name would be mentioned—at least as the provider of the gun. But wouldn't it be neater, and safer for Botsford, if Jim Pearse were dead as well? Then nobody would tell the police anything. Nev and Madge would be free to marry, with forty thousand from her late husband as a dowry.

Pearse picked up the phone and telephoned The King's Head. He let it ring until at last Eddie Groom came on, sounding disciplined but peeved. Pearse said, "Sorry to wake you, Eddie. I need your help. Can you come over to my place and bring your gun? That maniac Botsford is on his way here. I think he intends to kill me."

Eddie arrived a half hour later, looking wide awake. He gave the body on the floor a professional glance, then turned his attention to Pearse. "You look shattered," he said.

"Wait till I tell you what's been happening."

"You don't have to," the publican said. He took out a handgun as he sat down and made himself comfortable. The weapon was pointed at Pearse. "I've been in touch with Neville."

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a *NEW* short story by

NICK SPENCER

In his cover letter with this story, Nick Spencer ("The Mamba Tale," EQMM, August 1984) wrote: " 'The Drum Story' is also a rain-forest tale which grew out of my experience as a Peace Corps English teacher on the West Coast of Africa. During my two years on the continent, I became interested in the European and North American expatriates who, for reasons known only to them, chose to live away from their native land. My curiosity led to the enclosed . . ."

THE DRUM STORY

by NICK SPENCER

"Bissa!"

The houseboy turned suddenly toward the tree line. His eyes scanned the curtain of rain forest for the caller. A tall white man in a safari shirt stepped out from behind a giant eucalyptus and leaned his shovel against its trunk. His light-blond hair stood out against the darkness behind him.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "How did you find me?"

The domestic pointed at the Land Rover veiled by foliage a few yards off the road.

"Jeep tracks, sir. I followed them to warn you—"

"Warn me? About what?"

"Rain, Mr. Traeger."

A waft of wet air swept over the thicket from the Gulf of Guinea. The blast caught Bissa as he turned to face it, drenching his shirt so that the black hairs of his chest showed beneath the khaki. He gazed out at the whitecaps through sunken, watery eyes.

Garrett Traeger glanced over his houseboy's shoulder, past the

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shoreline row of palm trees to the molten-grey water that reflected the sky.

Distant tentacles of rain already streamed from a cloud bank near the horizon. Although he'd lived only three dry-season months in the coastal African town, stories of devastating rains had not escaped him. The real danger now lay with the bridge—a crude assortment of mahogany planks that spanned the gully between the town and the dense forest. Each year, flash floods swept the boards out to sea, idling lumber trucks for weeks.

"Your spade," said Bissa. "Shall I fetch it for you?"

Without a word, Traeger grabbed the shovel, swung it over one shoulder, and headed for the Land Rover.

"Perhaps the plants, sir," pursued the houseboy, striding toward the eucalyptus. "I'll carry the plants if you'll show me to them."

"No plants," Traeger called.

"But your spade is soiled, is it not?"

"No *plants*," the white man repeated loudly. He struck a wheel of the jeep with the business end of the shovel. The metal rang, spraying the jeep door with a film of red dust.

"Get in."

The domestic climbed meekly into the passenger side. Traeger angled the spade through the driver's window and shoved it toward the rear, where the handle clattered against the floor. The back was empty except for the soil and ceramic pots Traeger kept there to foster his cover as a visiting Canadian botanist.

As Traeger took the wheel, the first pellets of water pecked the roof of the jeep. Before the vehicle lunged out of the thicket, the Canadian had turned the windshield wipers on high.

When the jeep crested the last hill before the gully, Traeger floored the accelerator. The road—a straightaway to the gully below—was a river, and the hood of the Rover rose and fell on the uneven terrain like the prow of a ship.

As rain ricocheted into foam on the windshield, Traeger settled his back deep into the upholstery behind him. His knuckles went white around the steering wheel.

"Stop!" Bissa shouted to him.

Traeger would not or could not hear him. The front wheels sank into a deep pothole, lifting Bissa from his seat just as the Canadian plunged the vehicle into the gully. In a wrenching twist of metal, the jeep slammed against the rocky bottom where the bridge should

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have been. Bissa folded forward like a jackknife. His head battered the dashboard and he lay limp over it, groaning.

The Canadian pried his door open against the flow of the rushing water and waded knee-deep in the murky flow around the hood to the passenger door. Before gripping the chrome handle, he snatched a large floating coconut off the surface.

Then he did what he had to do.

Afterward, he leaned against the open door while water streamed through the jeep, dashboard high. Holding Bissa by the shirt collar with one hand and the coconut in the other, he backed into the shallows where the domestic's weight was no longer supported by the water. He heaved the coconut, pulled Bissa to the edge of the flow, and sank down on the bank, panting.

Only when he looked behind him moments later did he see the village boy.

The Canadian's house had a tiled living-room floor with louvered French windows that opened out for a view of the ocean. The village boy stood near the ledge, staring past the beads of water that dripped from the eaves. A fine drizzle still hissed against the corrugated roof.

Traeger pushed a shock of damp blond hair off his forehead with a towel until a quarter-sized birthmark lay exposed. He wore dry trousers and a pressed white shirt. When the boy turned, he brushed his hair forward over the spot.

"Hungry?" he asked, patting his stomach.

"No, Mister."

"Thirsty?"

"No, Mister." The boy wrapped two bony arms around his shirtless torso, and he looked shyly down at his mud-caked toes. Traeger pulled a crisp bill from the pocket of his trousers and folded the boy's fingers around it.

"One dollar, as promised."

"Thank you, sir."

"You speak English?"

"Yes, Mister." There was a glint of pride in the eyes. "I attend the village school."

"Good," said the white man. Traeger spoke neither pidgin nor the local tongue. "Then we can talk about what happened in the gully."

The young eyes went dim, somber.

"You understand, of course," ventured Traeger, "that Bissa's death

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was an accident." The Canadian spoke slowly so that the boy's school-book English would not be strained. "The bridge planks were gone. There was no way to see. The jeep hit the bottom of the gully—"

"The bridge wash away," the youngster offered.

"Correct," said the white man. "And that is what I—what we—must tell the police."

"No, Mister," said the boy. "The police. They know."

A furrow raised on Traeger's brow as if he were not quite sure the boy had understood.

"They know?"

The boy nodded. "They in the gully."

"How? How could they know?"

"Drums, Mister," said the boy. "Can you not hear them?"

The Canadian walked to the window. Through the drizzle came the rhythmic thumping that connected the people of the coastal villages with news of birth, death, and marriage in an ancient, wordless language.

One distant drumming came from the direction of the main road to the capital—the other from the gully where Traeger had been two hours earlier.

"What are the drums saying now?"

"They tell story, Mister," began the boy, his head cocked in a listening pose. "They talk about a man with light hair from across the sea. A man with a—" The boy hesitated, eyes on Traeger.

"Go on," said the white man.

"A red spot on his head."

"What else?"

The village boy squinted as one who strains to hear. "The drums say another man die. A—" his lips searched for the word "—how you say, teller."

"Teller?"

"Yes, Mister."

"Fast work!" remarked the Canadian. His smile bordered on admiration. "The villagers find Bissa, the drums beat, the police investigate, and the death of a storyteller is all over the hills." Traeger looked into the puzzled face of the boy who had been alternately translating and listening to the drums.

"Yes—I see what Mister mean," said the boy. "Bissa, the Teller of Tales."

The white man nodded. Ever since he'd hired Bissa, townspeople had assured him of the houseboy's prowess as a raconteur. He lit a

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cigarette from a cellophaned pack on the arm of a rattan and sighed a cloud of smoke into the room.

"Poor Bissa," he reflected. "I'm grateful you were there to help me carry him up the bank, the water rising as it was."

"Yes, Mister," replied the boy. "It is hard to carry two things."

"Two?"

"Yes, sir. Bissa. And that coconut."

"Coconut? You saw me with the coconut?"

The Canadian's words were harsh and the youngster retreated toward the window, watching Traeger's piercing blue eyes all the while.

"Tell me," whispered the white man. "Tell me exactly what you saw."

Bootsteps clicked on the walk beyond the door. Sharp raps followed. In the instant it took Traeger to turn in the direction of the knocks, the boy had bolted out the window, through the beads of water, and down the embankment to the beach.

The desk of Police Captain Nforgwei was a large slab of mahogany supported by two palm wine-barrels. A careless disarray of papers littered the unvarnished surface. In the center was a conch shell from which rose a column of smoke, drawn upward by the slow revolutions of a ceiling fan.

The policeman reached into the conch and withdrew the hand-rolled cigarette. As he leaned back in his chair, he smiled at the blond-haired man seated on the far side of the desk.

"A pity, Mr. Traeger," he said in a deep staccato, "that an officer as senior as I should tolerate a desk such as this. Cigarette?"

The Canadian shifted his weight and shook his head.

"A cheap smoke," mused the policeman with a nicotine grin. "Not like your Players, to be sure."

The white man studied the policeman's eyes. Then he drew a full pack of Players from his shirt pocket and tossed it casually on the corner of the desk as if he were discarding an empty box of matches. "Will this take long?" he asked.

"Mere formality, sir," the officer assured him. "I wish only to learn why you did not bring the matter of Bissa's death to our attention at once."

"I intended to," Traeger said evenly, "as soon as the storm passed."

"Ah, the rain!" replied the Captain briskly. "Of course, driving

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can be most treacherous when the windshield is full of water. It is a wonder that you yourself were not hurt or killed, Mr. Traeger."

The white man shrugged. "The steering wheel, I suppose. More protection."

Nforgwei lit a cigarette from the pack on the desk and blew a grey cloud of smoke into the ceiling fan.

"I trust," ventured the officer, "that the boy was helpful to you."

Traeger cleared his throat. "You found the boy?"

"On the contrary, sir. The boy found me. He came here after leaving your house."

"Why?"

"To show me this."

Nforgwei drew a crisp bill from a breast pocket. He snapped it taut, smelled it end to end like a fine cigar, and set it on the desk before the white man. "One dollar, almost new. The boy wished to exchange it for local currency. I wonder, Mr. Traeger, are there more where these came from?"

The Canadian stood slowly, reached into his billfold, and emptied the contents—a mixture of Canadian and African currencies—on the desk.

"Come now, sir," chided the officer. "Let us not play games!"

"Games?"

"The boy has spoken. About you. About the drum story. Surely you'll have no need for money in prison!"

Traeger slumped against the chair back.

"So," he began resignedly, "the boy did see me." He spoke as much to himself as to Nforgwei. "If that crack against the dashboard had killed Bissa outright, I wouldn't have needed the coconut to finish the job myself."

"Bissa?"

"Yes," said Traeger. "Bissa, the storyteller. Just as the drums told it."

Captain Nforgwei's raucus laugh echoed in the dingy station room. There were dark spaces between his jaundiced front teeth. "How generous of you, Mr. Traeger, to simplify my investigation with a confession!"

"Confession?" protested the white man. "I can't confess to what you already know."

"Quite so," agreed the policeman. "But you confessed to what I did not know. You confirmed the worst of my suspicions: that you killed Bissa, that you did so by a frontal blow with a coconut after your

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jeep hit the bottom of the gully. The deed would have remained the accident you intended had it not been for your admission just now. The boy saw the coconut in your hand, but he came after the murder."

He leaned a pair of meaty forearms on the desk. "This Bissa matter is not the reason I sent for you. As it happens, Mr. Traeger, when the little fellow translated the drums, his English was better than you thought. You see, the drums told the story of a murdered teller. A bank teller. A man you shot in a Toronto robbery four months ago."

Traeger stared dumbly as the policeman continued. "News of Bissa's death reached the capital by drum along with your unmistakable description. Authorities became suspicious about a tall white man with blond hair and a red spot on his forehead. A bit of checking—perhaps through your own embassy—uncovered the truth, which made its way to me by drum, and—" he picked up a yellow half sheet from the littered desk "—by telegram. Capital police should be here soon."

Nforgwei flicked the stub of his cigarette out the open window. Sunlight glared off the aluminum roofs of the market stalls across the street. The distant tattoo of drums filtered in through the forest beyond the town.

"Take heart, Mr. Traeger. You've become a legend on this coast." The uniformed man lowered his voice as if in confidence. "Naturally, you could stand trial for the murder in Canada. Or you could serve time in local jail for your latest crime and then face a second sentence in your country for the bank killing. A young man such as yourself—" He tisked. "Such a pity. Perhaps the authorities need only know about the Toronto incident."

Traeger cast an eager glance at the policeman. "You'd do that?" he said.

"I would," Nforgwei said, "for the rest of the money."

"What do you mean?"

"You had to hide your bank loot somewhere when you arrived here. Where better than the dense forest? A deep hole, perhaps? We both know your shovel has nothing to do with botany. I don't blame you for wanting to be the only one who knew the location. Your domestic came too close for comfort, it seems."

Outside, a jeep throttled the boards of the canal bridge fifty yards down the potholed road. The policeman set paper and a pencil on the desk near the white man.

"Ah," smiled the policeman. "That must be the capital police

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now—earlier than expected. I trust you will draw quickly, sir—roads, landmarks, the exact point of burial."

For a moment the seated man stared blankly across the desk. "How many murders," mused the officer, "shall I report? Two or one?"

Traeger picked up the pencil.

"One," he said.

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first publication in the U.S.

"Time for a respite," Mr. Wigthorpe told Felicity. "Turn in there."

When they were parked in the lay-by and the engine was silent, Felicity allowed herself to sag inside her seat-harness. "Don't want to wait, do they?" she complained, scowling at the fast-receding hatchbacks in pursuit of each other. "They forget they were learners themselves once."

"Human nature," Mr. Wigthorpe said tolerantly.

Martin Russell's "Bye-Bye, Shimmy," in the October 1986 issue, received an enthusiastic vote of approval from readers, who admired its depth of characterization and emotion—elements that define this deft and moving story as well . . .

THE LESSON

by MARTIN RUSSELL

The gear-change on the Renault required a different touch, Felicity discovered, from that on her father's Ford Fiesta. "Takes getting used to," she apologized, jolting the car almost to a standstill on the gradient leading up to the War Memorial. "Sorry about your cogs."

"They're designed to take punishment," Mr. Wigthorpe assured her. "Handbrake on, back into neutral, and try again."

After some abortive motor-crescendo, Felicity regained momentum at eight miles an hour toward the brow of the hill. At her side, Mr. Wigthorpe remained impassive. Only when she had achieved third gear and a modest canter did he issue a further instruction.

"Before you reach the Memorial, bear left. Follow the road leading down to the park. Watch out for the lights."

Activating the indicator, Felicity wobbled into the left-hand prong of the fork, veered for the curb, swung violently away, and headed for the center line. Her instructor said nothing. Teeth clenched, she

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struggled back onto course. Now traveling downhill, but held back by the lower gear, the car delivered a protest by way of a roaring note from the engine. Staring fixedly ahead, she said, "Should I change into top?"

"Stay in third," Mr. Wigthorpe advised calmly.

Moments later, they were on the level ground of the park, their pace reduced to an amble for which qualified drivers showed their contempt by zooming past the Renault like a swarm of demented wasps. Mr. Wigthorpe pointed a finger. "Time for a respite. Turn in there."

When they were parked in the lay-by and the engine was silent, Felicity allowed herself to sag inside her seat-harness. "Don't want to wait, do they?" she complained, scowling at the fast-receding hatchbacks in pursuit of each other. "They forget they were learners themselves once."

"Human nature," Mr. Wigthorpe said tolerantly.

He was built on a large scale, with a bull neck and a rugged but gentle face. As though conscious of his bulk, he sat laterally on the passenger seat, pressed to the nearside door with his arms folded tidily away so that there was a space of a couple of feet between himself and his pupil. He smelt faintly of tobacco. Felicity took no exception to that. So did her father, and so, to a greater degree, did Geoff, who contrived to smoke a good deal even though he was on the dole. Maybe because he was on the dole. A warm-hearted girl, Felicity took the view that life's hardships justified a little consolation. Mr. Wigthorpe she assessed as being a pipe man.

"I've only had a few goes," she excused herself, "in my dad's car. Just up and down a private road. It's different in traffic."

"Of course it is. I thought you coped well." He spoke like a psychiatrist charged with the task of restoring morale in an emotional wreck. His rather deep-set eyes twinkled remotely. "Perhaps you'd rather have learned on an automatic?"

Firmly she shook her head. "I want to be qualified for a manual. I'm going to share an old Mini with someone."

"That'll be nice. Planning to motor around quite a bit?"

"I'll use it to get to work."

"Good," he said solemnly. "What do you do, may I ask?"

Privately amused at the quaintness of his phraseology, she kept a straight face. "I'm a dress designer," she announced. "With Fulton's. You know? The big place on the Coventry road."

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"I know of it. A niece of mine was in the accounts department there. Good crowd to work for, I understand."

"They're okay. I'd like to branch out on my own."

"Design and sell your own creations? Why not?" Mr. Wigthorpe sounded judiciously applauding. "I'm sure you'd make a go of it. If you'll excuse my asking—did you make the one you're wearing?"

"This?" She glanced down at herself. "I did, actually. Does it show?"

"Only in the sense that you can see it's something a bit special." He spoke hurriedly, as if trying to erase a bad impression. "Nice colors. You've obviously got a flair." On a note of faint wistfulness, he added, "It must be satisfying to be artistic."

Frowning at the controls, trying to sort out the cigarette-lighter from the hazard-warning signal, Felicity said idly, "Most people are creative in their way."

"Some of us just plod through life."

"You probably achieve more than you realize. Dozens of new drivers, for a start, every year."

"I'm not sure that's altogether a laudable accomplishment." A chuckle shook him briefly. Falling silent, he pondered for a moment. "A spot of verse," he said suddenly, "now and then."

"Pardon?"

"I have a stab at poetry. Find it relaxing."

"Poetry," she repeated, impressed though dubious. "Have you had anything published?"

"My goodness. What d'you take me for? Tennyson? I just write for my own pleasure, that's all. Well, now. Feel like braving the mainstream again? Gear-lever in neutral, switch on."

Describing her first lesson that evening, Felicity laid stress upon the avuncular and supportive qualities of Mr. Wigthorpe. "I'd sooner have him," she explained, nursing her glass of white wine for which she had paid herself, "than some bigheaded know-all who just wants to be macho the whole time. He's a bit old-fashioned, but he's sweet."

"How old," Geoff asked jealously, "did you say he was?"

"How should I know? Forty to fifty. Pushing it, anyway. Who cares how old he is? Getting me through the test, that's what counts."

"I could have done that. I told you."

She gazed at him lovingly. He was looking thinner than usual. Job-hunting took it out of you, they said. She hoped he hadn't worn his tatty zip-jacket and jeans for any interviews he might have had.

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Diplomatically, she had refrained from asking. If he'd had any luck, he'd have told her.

"We've been into all that," she reminded him. "Husbands can't teach their wives to drive. Common knowledge."

"We're not husband and wife," Geoff retorted.

From the shelter of the wineglass she gave him a wide smile. "Not far off, are we?"

"Watch it, Lissy. You'll have me on the boil."

"So what's wrong with that?"

Their fingers interlocked under the table. "Sink the rest of that," he muttered, "and let's blow."

"My, aren't we impatient? I'm not sure," she said teasingly, "I feel like it tonight. What with a hard day's work, then an hour with Mr. Wigthorpe, not to mention the back seat of that Mini, which is hardly—"

"You put up with it last time." Standing up, he hauled her with him. "When I make my first half million," he murmured in her ear, "I'll get a Rolls with a fold-down king-sized bed. That suit you?"

"Why only *half* a million?"

An hour later, Felicity subsided gaspingly in Geoff's embrace. "Maybe you were right," she mumbled presently, nibbling his earlobe. "We should aim for a nine-seater. I think I've twisted my spine." She lay silently for a while. Eventually she giggled.

"What's up?" One-handed, Geoff was igniting a cigarette.

"I was just thinking. If Mr. Wigthorpe could see me now, he'd go spastic."

"Why?"

"Let's just say he obviously holds traditional views on things."

"You don't know. Behind it all, he could be a sex maniac. Is he married?"

"I never asked him."

During her second lesson, Mr. Wigthorpe directed Felicity into a residential estate with unadopted roads, the surfaces of which had evidently been laid down by gangs from an establishment for psychologically disturbed sedentary workers as part of a therapy program which had been prematurely called off. After her head had touched the roof for the third time, she applied the brake. "Mr. Wigthorpe," she said severely, "I do believe you're trying to turn me off motoring."

He looked startled, a little confused. "I'm afraid the potholes have

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got deeper since I last came along here. I do apologize, Miss Cox. We'll have to go on now—quicker than turning back. I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Her smile was designed to tell him she had spoken partly in fun. "I was really thinking of the car. Surely it can't be good for it?"

Mr. Wigthorpe peered ahead. "If you take the next on the right, I think it's smoother. We can practice some three-point turns."

He was right, and for the next fifteen minutes Felicity wrestled with the complexities of reverse gear and backward glances. Finally, at his bidding, she immobilized the car on a wide grass verge shielded by shrubs from the nearest house and switched off. "My arms," she puffed, flexing them. "They're nearly out of their sockets."

"You've done very well." He consulted his watch. "After you've rested, we'll potter back and try just one hill-start on the way." Settling himself against the nearside door, he gave a nervous cough. "I hope you'll still be able to wield a needle after this."

"I have people to do the stitching for me," she said complacently. "I work out the patterns."

"I see. But if you were to launch your own business—"

"I'd probably have to do the lot, at first. Couldn't afford staff."

"I'm sure you'd soon drum up trade." Mr. Wigthorpe glanced along the tree-flanked street, then back at her, as if comparing the two sights. "A word here, a smile there. You'd have customers eating out of your hand."

"Think so?"

"Not a doubt of it," he said earnestly.

Deftly, she turned the subject. "How's the verse-writing? Keeping at it?"

His face lit up. Hitching the seat-harness clear of his chest, he groped in an inside pocket. "I brought a piece along. Thought you might be interested."

"I don't know much about poetry," she said, embarrassed.

"No more do I," he assured her with an uneasy laugh. "I just let it pour out, sort of. Shall I read you a little?"

"Have we got time?"

"It'll only take a minute. While you're resting. This one's called 'Visions of Night.' I'll just read the first couple of verses. 'When lying in my lonesome bed, with hope and worry likewise shed . . .' "

Felicity listened in acute discomfort. At the conclusion of the second verse, she said quickly, "I like that. It's got real feeling. Do you find it hard to make up?"

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"The ideas come all the time. Expressing them, of course—finding the words, that's the tricky part."

"Let's hope the ideas don't dry up, eh?"

"No fear of that." Refolding the sheets of paper carefully, Mr. Wigthorpe restored them with manifest reluctance to his pocket. "In the past few days, I've had what you might call fresh inspiration."

"Great." Avoiding his eyes, she felt for the ignition switch and fired the engine. "Better be getting back, before I start owing you for a second hour." With a conscientious glare into the rearview mirror, she let in the clutch. "Is your wife poetic, too?" she asked, steering around a jutting manhole cover.

"I'm not married. I live with an aunt of mine. You wouldn't call her literary, but she puts up with my scribbling." Releasing a chuckle which sounded a shade less than spontaneous, Mr. Wigthorpe settled back and became an instructor again. "You'll find, if you take the gear-shifting a fraction slower—"

"Writes poetry," commented Geoff later that evening, "and shacks up with an aunt. He sounds a Wally."

"He's not, he's very nice. Oh, but his poems—" Felicity moaned at the memory. "If I hadn't been so bored, I'd never have kept a straight face. Hope he doesn't want to read me any more next time."

"He will," Geoff said with conviction. "He's taken a shine to you."

"Don't be daft. I expect he recites to all his learners."

"Yeah? He's lusting after you, that's what."

"So he might have an eye for the girls, what of it? At least it shows he's normal."

Felicity wriggled. She sensed that Geoff was right, that Mr. Wigthorpe had indeed taken a tumble in her direction. For some reason, she felt loath to concede the probability. She knew perfectly well the effect she had on most men. At twenty, she had been granted boundless opportunities to find out. This time, however, she had gone to some pains to preserve a detached manner toward Mr. Wigthorpe, for the sake of Geoff and because she keenly wanted to pass her driving test as soon as possible. If all her efforts had somehow produced the opposite effect, it was both irksome and ironic, but no fault of hers.

Geoff regarded her broodingly. "Any joy with the workshop?"

"No," she said dolefully. "They wanted sixty quid a week rent *plus* a down-payment of five hundred. Fat chance."

"Can't your old man help?"

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"You know how Dad's placed. His redundancy money won't stretch forever. It's all he can do to keep running the car and drive Mum to Sainsbury's twice a week. Where would he find that sort of cash? Even if he wanted to," Felicity added as an afterthought, "which he doesn't. They both reckon I should stay with Fulton's. Nice and safe."

"Why don't you, then?"

"Geoff, you know how I feel about it. Striking out on my own—it's all I ever wanted to do."

"You can get State aid."

"Only if you've a thousand of your own to put into the business. So far, I've got a hundred and thirty with the Halifax. —How about you?" she ventured. "Any hopes of a job?"

Geoff sniffed into his beer. "There's a recession on, hadn't you heard?"

"It's all I ever hear. There must be *something* you could be doing."

"Queuing for the dole is hard *enough* work for me. You try it sometime."

"Sooner be at Fulton's, thanks. Listen—you did mean what you said about sharing the Mini when I've passed my test?"

"No, love. Sorry." At her look of dismay, his face broke into the smile that sent her weak at the knees. " 'Course I meant it. Can't afford to run it by myself, can I?"

"Not on what they give you, I shouldn't think." Briefly annoyed, Felicity slapped his forearm and then, relenting, transmuted the assault into a caress. "Honestly, though, love—you ought to think about taking anything that's offered. It's not good, kicking your heels like this."

"It beats pen-shoving any day." His smile broadened to a grin. "I'll tell you this, Lissy. I'm not leaping into the first lousy opening they chuck at me. I've given the bastards my qualifications. If they can't come up with the goods, that's their funeral."

"You can't expect to walk into—"

"Look, I'm a technician, right? I've got skills. It's up to them to make use of 'em. Or if not, pay me compensation. That's all it is. Recompense."

Felicity eyed him dubiously. "You know about amplifiers, stuff like that. But if they can't find you a slot—"

"I've told 'em, haven't I? With a few hundred quid, I can get this mobile disco thing on the road with Eddie Sharpe. We'd be coining it. Then I'd be out of their hair, wouldn't I? Cheaper for 'em, in the long run. Just a measly enterprise grant, that's all we're asking for."

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"Keep on at them."

"They don't want to know."

Finishing his beer, Geoff seized her empty wine glass and went off to the bar. When he came back, replenished, Felicity was sitting with an unfocused gaze, her slender fingers tapping the table. He snapped his finger and thumb, making her jump.

"I was trying to work something out. If I could start up on my own, you could come in with me and maintain the equipment, couldn't you? The machines and that? Plus, you could drive around and deliver the goods—maybe pick up some custom, too?"

"Yeah, I could." Dumping the drinks, he sat down and regarded her cynically. "So how do you figure on raising the necessary?"

Her shoulders sagged. "I can't think of a way. Only by saving up."

"Take years."

"I know. And meanwhile you've nothing to occupy you." She looked mournfully across at the bartender. Presently she added, "If we did do something like that, we could get married, I suppose."

Geoff nodded absently. "I guess we could."

For her third lesson, Felicity was taken out onto the bypass and told to travel in the slow lane at forty until they came to the next turnoff. "Then," said Mr. Wigthorpe, "I want you to do a couple of circuits of the elevated roundabout and come back by way of Dallingham Village. That'll give you a few sets of lights and a dodgy junction to negotiate. Think you can manage that?"

She took in a breath. "Here's hoping."

Things went reasonably well as far as the village, where she took a wrong turning and arrived in a country lane the width of a car and a half, bordered by menacing ditches. "Keep on," advised Mr. Wigthorpe, "until we find somewhere to turn."

Before this occurred, they covered nearly a mile. The turn accomplished, Felicity prepared to retrace their route, but stalled in the gateway. The car refused to restart. "Flooded carb," pronounced Mr. Wigthorpe knowledgeably. "Give it a few minutes, then try again."

"I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

"Not a bit of it. Everyone stalls at times." His voice and manner were soothing. She gave him a grateful smile.

It seemed to jog a switch inside him. Delving into his inner pocket, he said with a touch of breathlessness, "I've another poem I thought you might care to hear."

Her heart slumped. "Great," she said brightly. "Is it a recent one?"

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"I composed it last night," Mr. Wigthorpe said significantly. "In the small hours," he appended, glancing at her and away. "I couldn't sleep."

"That's the creative instinct for you."

"It wasn't that. It was something more." His words began to slur. Breaking off, he studied the lined paper for a moment before starting to disclaim.

" 'The darkness threatens, and I think of you. The darkness topples, and you give me strength. The darkness stays around me, yet despite it all—' "

This time she let him continue to the appalling end. When his voice tailed off, she allowed a moment of reverence to elapse before remarking, "That's awfully nice. I do think you're talented, Mr. Wigthorpe."

To her faint alarm, he shook his head with vigor. "If I were, I'd do it more justice. The situation."

"The situation?"

The repetition, she knew instantly, was unwise. Although he remained still, gazing ahead at the field opposite, the atmosphere about them became abruptly supercharged. For a second or two he said nothing. Then, chokingly: "I've been looking forward to this session all day."

"Because it's the last?"

Her flippancy was in vain. His further shake of the head was ponderous, introspective. "I can't tell you, Miss Cox, how much I appreciate your company."

"I appreciate yours."

"It's hard for me to explain—"

"Don't try. Will the car start now, do you think?"

He blinked, as if someone had flicked him lightly across the face with a rag. "We might have a bash," he said after a moment's delay. "Clock's ticking on, I suppose. Always gallops, doesn't it, when you're—having a good time. Foot off the accelerator, Miss Cox. Two or three turns of the starter. If it doesn't fire—"

Once more he was the competent instructor, handing out directions. Complying with them, Felicity succeeded in restoring life to the hunk of metal under her command and navigating it, with a sense of relief, back to the village and the main road. After that, she had no difficulty in keeping the dialogue to a strictly business level.

Monitoring her progress, Mr. Wigthorpe became monosyllabic.

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She gained the feeling that he felt rebuffed. To counter this impression, she introduced a matier note as they reentered the fringes of the town. "Saturday tomorrow. Hooray! I like weekends, don't you?"

"To be honest, I don't find them a lot different. I'm generally working, you see."

"Yes, I suppose so. Your busiest time, I expect."

"It's remarkable," he said solemnly, "the number of people who want to learn to drive on a Sunday morning."

"I'd hate that. Don't you get tired?"

"A bit, sometimes. The money comes in useful, of course. We get extra for weekend working, and as I'm saving up for a special holiday—"

"Sounds exciting," she said, as he paused. "Where are you off to?"

"A cruise. All around the Med. Three weeks."

"Away from the petrol fumes. Terrific. You should have a great time."

"I'm hoping so."

"Going by yourself?" Felicity liked to take a friendly interest in people's activities, especially those involving recreation. She had a secret yearning to go off with Geoff to somewhere like the Algarve. Fat hope, just now.

"That's the plan at the moment." Mr. Wigthorpe's utterance sounded a little thick. He sat gauging her approach to the driving school's car park. "Out a little. More to the center. Now hard round. Good. Mind you, I wouldn't say no to some company."

"How about your aunt?"

"She's arthritic, I'm afraid. Can't get about. That space over there." As the car bucked to a halt, Felicity having delayed her declutching an instant too long, he began fumbling with the clip of his seat-belt, making something of a job of it. Still manipulating, he added whimsically, "If you felt like a sea voyage yourself, after tackling the perils of roadcraft, you'd be more than welcome."

"It's a thought." She kept the exchange at banter level. "Problem is, I couldn't take three weeks off. Not all at once."

"It needn't be the Mediterranean," Mr. Wigthorpe returned eagerly, to her consternation. "Something shorter."

"Mm. I still couldn't afford it."

"Anyone who came along," he said, stuttering a little, "would travel as my guest."

"Oh, well then. You should have no trouble finding somebody. Either way, I hope the trip comes up to scratch. Thanks for the

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lesson, Mr. Wigthorpe." A shade feverishly, she released herself from the car. "Same time Monday?"

"I'll be here."

As she walked from the car park, she sensed that he was gazing after her. It was like something out of soap opera. Heroine quits scene—cut in to taut profile of abandoned male—feed in violas.

She had a laugh about it with Geoff after the cinema. "You were right, love. He's gone and fallen for me."

"What did you think?" Geoff snorted. "A middle-age crush—that's what he's got. Watch out for yourself next time. He could get serious."

"I can handle Mr. Wigthorpe," she said confidently.

"Make sure you do. I don't want you getting hurt."

She gave a small mirthful scream. "He wouldn't harm a fly. You want to see him."

"I don't, that much. How many more lessons have you got?"

"Three. Then I thought I could practice in this, till I take the test."

"I don't know about that."

"We're sharing, aren't we?"

"Sharing, sure. That doesn't mean wrecking."

"I won't muck it up, silly. Mr. Wigthorpe says I change gear very smoothly."

"I'll bet he does. Let's see you do it now."

"You've a one-track mind," she said in mock disgust, starting to peel off her sweater.

Some while later, Geoff adopted his usual procedure after their rear-seat maneuvers, lighting up a cigarette and creating a fug inside the Mini while she nestled sleepily against him. Felicity liked this companionable aftermath, although she did sometimes wonder where he got the cash to smoke as he did, besides partly running the car and enjoying rather more than the odd pint. She felt it diplomatic not to ask. This evening she felt especially at ease—cosy, protected. At times like this, when they were alone together, Geoff was at his best—manly, desirable, almost tender. In company, he tended at times to ignore her. She understood that. It was just his awkwardness. Mildly hurtful as it could be, she had learned to endure.

Pulling lingeringly on the cigarette, Geoff tapped ash onto the Mini's uncarpeted floor. "This cruise," he remarked. "Reckon he was serious about it?"

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"Mr. Wigthorpe?" She was briefly startled. Her driving instructor had been some way removed from her thoughts. "I'd never be surprised. If I'd said yes, he'd probably have whipped out the tickets then and there."

"A three-week beanfeast," Geoff murmured reflectively, "'round the Med. That'll cost him a bomb."

"Mm. Even for one."

"He must have enough readies for two," Geoff pointed out. "Otherwise he wouldn't have offered."

"That's true."

Geoff relapsed into further musings. Presently he said, "How respectable would you say he is?"

"You're still on about Mr. Wigthorpe? I've no idea." She frowned. "What d'you mean, exactly—*respectable*?"

"Conventional, then. Law-abiding."

"All I know is he's a gentleman. I mean, you can tell. He'd never overstep the mark. He's just not that sort."

Geoff nodded as if satisfied. "It's given me an idea. Listen to this."

Minutes later, Felicity sat with a feeling of congestion in her chest and stomach. Leaning back into the corner of the seat, she chose her words with care. "You're joking, Geoff, aren't you? You're not serious about all this?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's—immoral. I could never dream of it."

"No need to dream. Just a case of performing."

"Don't be daft. Let's change the subject."

"Can you pick any holes in it?" he demanded, turning to confront her.

"Only about ninety. Main one is, it would never work."

"But what if it did?"

Numbly she shook her head. "Don't even talk about it."

"Okay." Taking a final puff, he ground the cigarette end into the flooring with his heel. After a few moments' silence, he said, "I thought you wanted to get married."

She placed a hand impulsively on his arm. "I do, love. I'd give anything—"

"Go ahead, then. Do this, and we can."

"I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"'Course not. You'd be living with me. Properly, all legal and legit. All it takes is a bit of effort."

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"There's more to it than that," she replied, low-voiced, "and you know it."

"I only know you're not the girl I took you for."

Thrusting away the backrest of the front passenger seat with a foot, Geoff swarmed over it and returned to his place behind the wheel. Hurriedly adjusting her clothing, Felicity joined him only just in time before he wrenched activity into the nine-year-old motor and reversed violently from the woodland clearing in which they had been concealed.

He drove back fast into town. Sitting in unhappy silence, she debated what to say when they stopped. "Look, Geoff," she began, as the car grated to a halt outside her parents' house, "you know I'll do anything in reason. But there's no way—"

"Forget it." Leaning across her, he shoved open the door. "See you around."

"I just don't see myself—"

"I said forget it." He waited until she was out on the pavement, then got noisily into gear. "Have a nice weekend."

Slamming the door shut, he took off. The car vanished around the corner, its elderly cough dwindling into the night. Choking back tears, Felicity ran for the house.

On Monday she was glad to be back at Fulton's. She had spent a wretched two days waiting for the phone to ring, combating the urge to swallow her pride and her scruples and make the call herself, trying to devise other ways of occupying her time. Since she had started knocking around with Geoff, she seemed to have mislaid the knack of independent hustle. At Fulton's, she was at least usefully employed among people who took her as they found her—unlike her own family, who knew her too well to be fooled by any attempted camouflaging of mood. She kept herself hard at work all day, sustaining her resistance to the seductive idea of sneaking to the telephone and dialing the number of the rented premises Geoff shared with five of his mates. The first move, she told herself sternly, must come from him.

Punctually at six-thirty, she was back at the driving school. Greeting her with formal courtesy, Mr. Wigthorpe announced that they would begin with ten minutes of reversing around corners. He seemed preoccupied. Just her luck, Felicity thought drearily. For once, she stood in urgent need of some friendly chat. At his bidding, she drove to a quiet, broad thoroughfare, a cul-de-sac leading onto

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the Common, and embarked on the tormenting process of hugging the curbstones while contorting her neck. Repeatedly, feeling on edge, she made a botch of it. Eventually Mr. Wigthorpe signified that enough was enough.

"We'll come back to that," he said tactfully. "Let's try a little straight motoring, shall we? Bear left out of here, follow the road through to Remington, then turn right and complete the circle back into town. Got that?"

As they bowled toward Megwitch, a hamlet on the way to Remington, Felicity made an attempt to thaw the atmosphere. "I'm starting to feel peckish. Didn't have time for any lunch." In fact, she had been unable to face the meal. She now felt hollow, somewhat lightheaded. "D'you have something midday, Mr. Wigthorpe, or just work through?"

"I normally stop for a sandwich. Here—" Wrestling something out of his offside pocket, he snapped off a chunk and passed it over. It was two squares of milk chocolate. "That'll keep you going."

"Thanks very much." She chewed energetically until speech was again feasible. "These your emergency rations?"

"You could say that. Have some more."

"Better not," she said regretfully. "Can't concentrate on the road."

He pointed ahead. "Pull in there a minute. We can finish the slab between us."

A little dubiously, Felicity followed orders and brought the car to a halt parallel with a thorn hedge where the road widened. Breaking the chocolate bar in half, Mr. Wigthorpe divided the spoils. "I'm quite hungry myself," he confessed, champing discreetly. "Like you, I had very little at lunchtime, and it'll be an hour or two yet before I get supper."

"Does your aunt cook for you?"

"When she can. If she's feeling out of sorts, I hash up something for the two of us."

His existence sounded a barrel of laughs. Trying to formulate an innocuous follow-up, Felicity detached two more chocolate squares from her portion and promptly dropped the remainder into the space between the seats, where it disappeared from view. "Oh, drat!"

"I'll get it." He felt around the floor with his right hand. "Must have gone under your seat," he said presently. "I think I might be able to—"

What happened next took Felicity off guard. At one moment, Mr. Wigthorpe was inclined toward her, his right arm swallowed up, the

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next she felt pawing movements against her left thigh. Although her skirt was lined, it had ridden up while she drove, and for a second or two his fingers were in contact with her bare flesh. She froze. Seemingly unaware, her instructor continued his search for the chocolate, his face reddening a little as he probed. "Don't bother," she said tightly. "Leave it."

He straightened up. "Must have slid," he said breathlessly. His right hand was back in his lap, exerting pressure on the remains of the bar. "Have some of this."

"No, it's all right, thanks. We'd best get moving."

Restarting the car, she took it swiftly away. Although Mr. Wigthorpe had raised no objection, she sensed that he would have preferred to be the one to resume the lesson. Too bad. He shouldn't have tried it on.

Had he tried it on? The facial flush, the breathlessness—both could have been due to his floor-exploration. But in retrospect, she could feel the pressure of his fingertips. Was it true what everyone said? *Men—they're all the same. No exceptions.* She drove in silence, obeying his murmured instructions, impatient to be back. When they reached the car park, instead of finding a spare space she pulled up in the center, applied the handbrake, and climbed out immediately. "Got an appointment. See you Wednesday, unless I have to cancel."

Giving him no time to reply, she walked off. In the High Street, she found a call-box. "Geoff?" she said, when one of his house-mates brought him to the phone. "You're on. I'll do it."

"That's my girl."

By Wednesday evening Felicity's nerves felt stretched, as if one stroke of a blade at a central point would have sent them twanging in all directions. The working hours at Fulton's had passed in a haze. At one point, her best friend and colleague, Jo Isaacs, had voiced concern about her. "Anything the matter, Liss? You're looking all white and pinched." Felicity explained that she hadn't slept much the previous night (inaccurate—she hadn't slept at all) and was finding it hard to focus. Thereafter she had exerted herself to appear normal, but the inner strain had taken its toll of her resources. A final telephone conversation with Geoff at lunchtime, to tie up loose ends, had done little for her peace of mind.

The afternoon had stretched itself to a month. At times she was convinced that someone was going around altering the clocks. In-

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specting her keenly during the tea-break, Jo Isaacs opined that she was sickening for something and should go straight home to bed. From then until closing time, Felicity had kept out of her way.

Now it was six-twenty. Fifty yards ahead along the street lay the entrance to the driving school, awaiting her approach. Her stomach churned. Her knees felt unreliable, as if contemplating sudden defection to leave her gasping in the gutter. Loitering at a dress-shop window, pretending to examine the styles, she took deep, desperate breaths and tried to think of ends rather than means. A shop of her own. A new range of designs, Chez Felicity, that would capture the nation. Employment for Geoff. A future for both of them.

Inducing her muscles to function, she covered the fifty yards and went inside.

As usual, Mr. Wigthorpe was ready for her. His greeting was polite. Shining her most brilliant smile at him, Felicity declared, "I think I'm on form this evening. I feel lucky."

"That's good," he responded gravely, holding the car door for her.

"In fact, I'm ready for anything. Can I choose the route this time, Mr. Wigthorpe?"

"If you like." Installing himself alongside, he checked her harness meticulously, as he always did, before buckling himself down and assuming his self-effacing posture against the nearside door. "Where were you thinking of making for?"

She made a show of pondering. "The Wickling road?" she suggested. "It's got a lot of ups and downs, and the traffic's quite thick this time of evening. Then we could skirt round into Maychester and come back over the Common. How about that?"

He considered the program. "A shade on the lengthy side," he pronounced, "but let's see how we go."

"I'll smash the circuit record," she said breezily.

It was better once they were moving. After an initial tangling of the gears, the product of muscular inhibition, she was able to relax a little by dint of concentrating on roadcraft and mechanical controls. Apart from a word or two of encouragement or guidance, Mr. Wigthorpe remained taciturn. Once they had passed through Wickling and were bearing east, Felicity wriggled herself into a more tolerable position inside the seat-straps and said, "Woof! How am I doing?"

"Quite nicely. Try to slow down at traffic lights a moment sooner."

"Sorry." She flipped him an impish grin. "My headstrong nature. Dad's always telling me I'm too impulsive."

Mr. Wigthorpe made no comment. Frequent glances through his

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nearside window seemed to imply that he was appreciating the scenery more than her skills as a motorist. After another mile she gave a cough, lowered her voice to a confiding level. "I've been looking forward to this all day."

"You like driving?"

"When it's with you."

There was a pause. "It's comforting," he said on a dry note, "for an instructor to be told that."

"Actually, I was talking more on a personal basis."

Silence. Against the rules, she turned her head to peep at him. "You're meant to say, 'And I like you, too, Miss Cox.' Where did I slip up?"

"I beg your pardon. I hadn't— To be honest, I was a little surprised that you showed up this evening."

"Surprised?" she repeated innocently. "Whatever for?"

"You did say something on Monday," he reminded her, "about possibly having to cancel."

"Did I? I don't remember. Probably just being cautious."

"Cautious *and* impulsive," he remarked, a touch of humor sliding into his voice. "Quite a combination."

"Well, you know what they say about women."

"No. What do they say?"

"Never take 'em at face value. Half the time they don't know what they're after themselves."

Mr. Wigthorpe sat apparently digesting this. A sign marked MAYCHESTER appeared on their left and he became alert, sustaining his vigil until they had cleared the town center and were heading back south, on course for the Common. "You were right," he observed presently. "You're handling the controls quite dashingly this evening. As long as you don't overdo it. Measured movements—give yourself time. You know, as far as you're concerned, yourself, I don't really believe it."

"Pardon?"

"What you were saying just now. I imagine you've a very good idea of what you're after."

Felicity's fingers tightened on the wheel. She said brightly, "Okay—tell me. I'd like to know."

"I can't tell you, exactly. What I meant was, you've a schedule for life mapped out and you're the type who'll stick to it. Or am I mistaken?"

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"Golly. You're a mind-reader. That's just how I've always seen myself."

Between them and the Common lay a Forestry Commission area, planted with larch and spruce, into which the road now dived. Although the trees were shielded from the highway by mesh fencing, the gateways to the access tracks lay well back, fronted by graveled expanses. After elaborate signaling, Felicity drove the car onto one of these and pulled up, facing the gate. Another car, unoccupied, was parked at the farther end of the inlet some distance away. Mr. Wigthorpe looked at her inquiringly.

"I can't talk properly," she explained, "while we're belting along. There's just something I'd like to mention."

Her heart hammered. She was having supreme difficulty in preventing her voice from skidding between keys. To hide the trembling of her hands, she occupied them with the seat-belt release, finally thrusting the harness clear and leaning back with a sigh."*That's* better. I must relax for five minutes—I hate being strapped in the whole time, don't you?"

"It's reckoned to be for our own good," he replied noncommittally. "What was it you wanted to say?"

"It's about Monday. I'm afraid you might have thought I was a bit offhand when I took off. I don't like to give a wrong impression."

"Monday." Mr. Wigthorpe looked thoughtful. He seemed to be playing for time. "You did leave a little—rapidly, perhaps. I took it that you were in a hurry to keep your next appointment. No offense taken, I assure you."

"That's good." In her own ears, her squeal of laughter rang near-hysterical. "I'd still like to explain, though. The point is—" She hesitated confusedly. "This is going to sound dreadful. You know when you were looking for the chocolate?"

He nodded. "Under the seat. I found it afterward."

"Oh. Well, it seems silly now, but— You were poking around, weren't you, and having to lean over? And I thought at one stage your other hand was doing a spot of investigating by itself. On me, that is. D'you get what I mean?"

She looked at him full face. Deepset though they were, his eyes were bulging and his color had risen, beet-red. He blinked several times.

Before he could speak, she went on swiftly. "Of course, I realize now how wrong I was. You're not the sort, Mr. Wigthorpe, are you?

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I was just being fanciful. But that's the reason I went off in a bit of a huff. Can you forgive me?"

He swallowed, twice. Then cleared his throat. "Miss Cox, you're putting me in a rather awkward position. A driving instructor—"

"I know, I understand." With a small deft movement, she tapped the catch of his seat-belt, releasing it. He seemed unaware of what she had done. He looked dazed. Regenerating her widest smile, she added roguishly, "I'm not saying I'd have blamed you, anyhow. I mean, two people packed close together in a car. A lot of temptation, isn't there? That's why you instructors have to be extra careful. I appreciate that."

"But the point is—"

"I was annoyed with myself, mainly. For overreacting."

"Not at all. If you had reason to suppose—"

"That's just it. There wasn't any reason. And that choked me a bit, too, when I came to look back."

Glancing away, Mr. Wigthorpe scanned the surrounding woodland as if seeking inspiration. He remained mute. Softly she said, "The truth is, you see, I'm not really the type of girl you might have taken me for. I'm no shrinking violet. I've got modern ideas."

Once more he cleared his throat. "There's no necessity for you to—"

"If a man appeals to me, I can't see the sense of smothering the feeling—on either side. It's just natural. Why get all uptight about it?"

"But there have to be limits, boundaries. When you're older—"

She turned herself sideways in the seat. "What does age have to do with it? Mutual attraction—isn't this what it's all about?"

She coiled an arm lightly around his neck. He felt rigid. With a slight tug, she drew him closer, went halfway to meet him. Her hair brushed his left cheek. Twisted at the waist, he sat with his face toward the rear window of the car.

Neither resisting nor cooperating, he remained stiffly immobile as she nuzzled his jawline with the tip of her nose. With her free right hand, she was pulling at the zip of her sweater. Ordinarily, it ran easily—tonight it had snagged. Overcoming the obstacle with an extra wrench, she took the zip all the way down and parted the sweater. Beneath it she was wearing nothing.

Next, her skirt. The zip-tag eluded her. A moment's panic—then her fingers made contact. She lowered the zip a few inches. Then,

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taking her hand away, she touched the hazard-warning-lights switch on the panel.

Within seconds, footsteps crunched the gravel outside. Bracing herself against Mr. Wigthorpe, careful not to drag herself clear of him, Felicity uttered a scream.

The nearside door was thrown open. "What's going on?"

Geoff, when he chose, could sound wrathfully authoritative. For a moment, she herself was almost convinced of his anger. Collecting her senses, she started to struggle. "Please help me," she gasped. "I'm being attacked by this man."

"Out of it, buster. Leave her alone."

Yanked unceremoniously out of his seat, Mr. Wigthorpe landed with both feet on the gravel and the upper part of his body draped around the door-pillar. Geoff peered past him into the car. "All right, Miss? Not hurt? Lucky I was passing. What happened?"

"We were just sitting here talking, when he made a grab at me." Felicity made clumsy attempts to zip up the sweater, which was still in disarray. "He interfered with my clothes."

"I did nothing of the kind." Mr. Wigthorpe spoke in a throttled way from his half sprawl. "I never touched her."

"Didn't look that way to me." Geoff made a sign to Felicity with his eyes. Scrambling out by the offside door, she rounded the car to join him, completing the zipping of her sweater in front of Mr. Wigthorpe's popping gaze. Shedding his jacket, Geoff placed it prudishly about her shoulders, pulled it across her. "There you go. Feel a bit shaken up, I daresay. Know this gentleman, do you?"

"Only as an instructor. I wasn't expecting—" Burying her face in her hands, Felicity burst theatrically into tears.

"See what you've done?" Geoff demanded of Mr. Wigthorpe. "Scum like you should be locked up. I'll see your employers hear of this."

"Look, you're under a total misapprehension." By now the instructor had struggled upright to stand with a hand clutching the car roof while he gazed disbelievingly at the sobbing girl. "I didn't assault her. On the contrary, she—"

"Try telling that to the magistrates. I'll get you fired for this."

"Don't be absurd. It's her word against mine."

"Oh, no it's not, squire. I saw what was happening through the window. You'd got her sweater half off."

"It's not true! If her clothes were disarranged—" Mr. Wigthorpe

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groped for words. He looked shell-shocked. "Who are you, anyway? What right have you got to interfere?"

"I'm a witness, mate," Geoff said pleasantly. "Heard of them, have you? Witnesses? I'll be speaking up for this lady in court—count on it. After I've had a word with your firm's management." He turned righteously to Felicity. "Like a lift home, Miss?"

"Please." Mopping her eyes with the handkerchief he proffered, she avoided Mr. Wigthorpe's gaze.

"The Mini, over there. The door's open."

She began walking slowly toward it. Behind her, Geoff's voice continued its tirade. "Now then, squire. Let's just sort out a few details, shall we? Aside from your name, which I can find out, no problem, I want to know—"

Opening the door of the Mini, Felicity subsided into the front passenger seat and stared numbly ahead at the trees. From the gateway the two male voices were faintly audible, but even with the window down the words escaped her. She felt sick. A van went past at speed. It was the first vehicle along since they had stopped. Geoff had been right. At this time of day, the road to the Common drew little traffic, and such as there was had attention only for its own affairs.

Presently she remembered her skirt. Raising herself in the seat, she reinstated the zip and adjusted the garment until it sat once more comfortably on her hips. Geoff's jacket she removed and hung on the neck-restraint of the adjoining seat. She felt an insistent desire to rinse her hands in ice-cold water.

A renewed scrunching of the gravel announced Geoff's return. Apathetically, she looked up as he swung himself into the driver's seat. He bared his teeth at her.

"Okay, partner. Let's fade."

As he reversed into the road, she saw that Mr. Wigthorpe had his head and shoulders inside the Renault, performing movements which indicated that he was brushing the front seats and floor. For some reason the sight brought back her sensation of nausea. She sat in silence, fighting it.

Wasting no time in achieving his customary reckless speed, Geoff carolled a few unmusical notes at tenor pitch and biffed the wheel twice with his right palm. "Lissy, you were great! What a performance—you should be on TV."

She took a breath—the first, it seemed, in an hour or more. "What did he—?"

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"Two hundred."

"*How* much?"

"A hundred apiece. Not bad, huh?"

Felicity stared out at the forest. After a moment she said, "Not as much as we hoped."

Geoff chortled. "That's just for starters. Wait till he's coughed up the first installment. Then he'll be up for grabs."

"What if he doesn't have the money?"

"Taking a cruise, wasn't he? You don't do the Med on a couple of lousy hundred." Extracting a cigarette from a packet lying open on the panel shelf, Geoff handed it to her to light. "Relax, Lissy. If we don't at least double the score by this time next week, I'm losing my touch. The guy's petrified."

"What did you say to him?"

"Just suggested he might want to keep his job. And I mentioned his aunt. That scared him paralytic. The idea of her getting to hear—"

Felicity said lifelessly, "A few hundred quid isn't going to solve our problems."

"Won't exactly add to 'em, will it?"

"Won't it?"

Geoff gave her a sharp glance. "What's got into you? He's a groper—you said so yourself. He deserves to pay for his fun."

"I don't know. I'm not positive about him touching me. On purpose, I mean. He might've thought it was the seat-plastic."

A sardonic laugh exploded from Geoff. "Sure he did."

She sat silently for half a mile. "When is he paying up?"

"Tomorrow night, same place. You needn't come. I'll meet you afterward and we'll celebrate."

"That'll be nice."

At Fulton's the next morning, Jo Isaacs studied her with real concern. "You look worse than ever. Great dark rings under your eyes. Sure it's not gastric flu or something?"

"I'm all right," said Felicity. "Had another bad night, that's all."

"Something on your mind?"

"Nothing special."

"Bust-up with Geoff?"

Felicity shook her head. "Saw him yesterday evening. We went to a disco."

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"That's it, then." Jo nodded wisely. "You were too keyed-up to sleep."

"You might be right."

At eight o'clock that evening, she sat waiting for Geoff in the lounge bar of The Crown and Anchor. A few early-evening male imbibers had eyed her speculatively, but by keeping her face interred in the evening paper she had contrived to preserve her isolation at the corner table, while absorbing not a syllable of the newsprint's contents.

Although she felt empty and shaky inside, she couldn't eat. The packet of bacon-flavored crisps she had purchased with her vodka-and-tonic sat untouched at her elbow. Breakfast had been a cup of strong coffee and she hadn't bothered with lunch. She knew she needed nourishment, yet the bare thought of it turned her stomach. The vodka was going to her head. Regardless, she ordered a refill.

The bartender raised his eyebrows. "On a bender tonight?"

"Celebrating," she told him.

As she paid for the fresh drink, Geoff arrived, wordless and poker-faced. She got him a beer. When she joined him at the table, she could tell from his breath that he had been drinking already. She inspected him anxiously. He seemed in no hurry to talk.

Bracing herself with sips from her glass, she took the initiative. "Well? How did it go?"

He felt inside his hip-pocket. Producing a small buff envelope, he slid it across the table. She placed a hand on it but left it lying there. "A hundred?"

"Fifty."

"But you said—"

"A hundred. That's all he showed up with. That's your cut. There'll be more, don't you worry."

She stared down at the envelope. "He's already halved what you agreed. What makes you so sure he'll come up with extra?"

"I told you. He's scared."

"Then why has he fobbed you off with less?"

"He's not fobbed me off," Geoff said irritably. "I'm touching him again next week."

"What for? Another hundred?"

"Better than peanuts, isn't it?"

"It's got us nowhere," she said slowly, after an interval. "We needed at least a thousand between us, just to have a hope of getting started. We've done all this for nothing."

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Geoff shrugged. "If you don't want it, I'll have it back." He drew the envelope away. She made no attempt to stop him.

"Try and do something constructive with the money," she said dully.

"You bet. Pay for new brake-linings, for a start."

His tetchiness had evaporated. She forced herself to smile at him. "Well," she said, "that's that. Cheerio, Mr. Wigthorpe. Have to find a different driving school now, won't I?"

"Lots to choose from." His grin was vulpine. "Plenty more Mr. Wigthorpes, too, I daresay."

Felicity leaned back. "Never again. Once is too often."

In the course of the ensuing week she saw little of Geoff. He was busy, he told her on the phone, chasing up job prospects and taking the Mini in for repairs. His natural bounce was unimpaired. Manifestly he enjoyed having cash to spend. On one topic he was evasive: that of the proposed follow-up meeting with Mr. Wigthorpe. Felicity suspected that he had no real intention of further pursuit. She was glad. The entire sordid business was best forgotten.

She continued to have difficulty in sleeping.

On the Friday morning of the following week, she came down to breakfast to find her mother seated at the kitchen table, intent on an item in the local newspaper. At Felicity's appearance she looked up. "Arthur Wigthorpe," she announced. "Wasn't that the name of your bloke? The one teaching you to drive?"

Felicity's vitals gave a lurch. "Right," she agreed, with outward calm. "What's he in the news for? Instructor of the Year Award?"

"Far from it. He's been found dead, poor beggar. Aspirin overdose. Killed himself, they reckon." Mrs. Cox passed her daughter the newspaper. "Too many details with the likes of you, I shouldn't wonder. Shot his nerves."

The rest of the day slipped by in a fog. The one distinct recollection to stay with Felicity up to late afternoon was a midmorning telephone conversation with Geoff. She had a notion that she had tried his number half a dozen times before finally reaching him, but the important thing was that they had spoken and agreed to meet. Through the shroud, she clung to that. At lunchtime, instead of going to the canteen with Jo, she wandered out to the shops, but bought nothing—simply drifted amid the crowds, searching for something she couldn't pin down. Later, without conscious effort,

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she found herself back at her workbench. From extremely close range, Jo was addressing her earnestly and incomprehensibly. Some while later, the staff welfare officer was asking questions while feeling her forehead and peering into her eyes.

Later still, she was in a car. The driver was vaguely known to her. From another department, he sometimes gave her outline designs to develop. He, too, was asking questions.

"You're sure I can't take you right to your door?"

"No, thanks. This'll be fine."

"Get straight to bed, won't you?"

She promised to go to bed.

When the car was out of sight, she turned away from the mouth of her own street and caught a bus back into town. Since there was an hour to kill, she had a black coffee in a bar and took two more codeine tablets, making six in the day—or was it eight? She couldn't recall, and anyhow they seemed to make no difference to the headache. It wasn't a genuine headache. More a sensation of pressure, as if her skull was being asked to accommodate more than it could.

The Mini was five minutes late. When it finally arrived at the agreed corner, she got inside with barely a glance. "Drive up to the Common."

Geoff complied inscrutably. Neither of them spoke until the car was wedged into their favorite spot, between clumps of gorse on the side of the Common farthest from the town, remote from the nearest through road. It was amazingly quiet. Felicity could hear the beating of tiny mallets inside her bruised head. She turned to face him.

"When did you see him again?"

"Tuesday," Geoff answered with a kind of sullen airiness.

"And I suppose you put the screws on?"

"What we agreed, wasn't it?"

"How much did you get out of him that time?"

"Another hundred." Tilting himself, Geoff produced an envelope. "Here's your fifty."

She averted her face. "I don't want it."

"Suit yourself." The envelope crackled as he stuffed it away. "Bit late in the day, isn't it, to get sensitive?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Look, I didn't ask the bloke to take it so hard. He shouldn't have tried to get fresh with you."

"He never did."

"He what?"

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"I don't believe he'd any intention— What's the use? He's gone now." She stared bleakly out at the Common. "When you left him on Tuesday, did you say you'd be back?"

"I left him to figure it out for himself."

She said bitterly, "Well, he did that all right, didn't he?"

Raindrops spotted the Mini's windscreen. It was the end of a dry spell. Felicity sat tracing the progress of the droplets as they crawled down to the lower edge of the frame. Beside her, Geoff stretched and yawned.

"Sniveling about it won't fetch him back. He'd only himself to blame, for Christ's sake. If he didn't want to pay, he needn't have. He could have taken us on. Only he didn't. I know what that suggests to me."

Her mind raced in useless circles. While she was striving to bring it to heel, she felt a hand and arm slide around her waist, tighten slightly. Geoff's voice crooned into her right ear. "You think it through, Lissy. You'll find I'm right. So in the meantime, why eat your heart out? Serves no purpose. Come on."

Unwillingly, she let herself be impelled against the front of his leather jacket. Their lips made contact. Light contact. Geoff knew when not to rush her. As the magic started to flow, she relaxed a little and sagged toward him. The position was excruciating. Her body was twisted and the contents of the zip-pockets near his lapels pressed painfully into her. She drew back. "Take that thing off."

Responding with alacrity, he threw the jacket onto the rear seat.

By the time they had quietened and the car had stopped rocking, the rainfall had increased to a torrent. Geoff lit up the inevitable cigarette. Limp against the door, she watched him smoke it to the end, saw his langor slip away, the restlessness return. Sure enough, he sat up. "I told Bob I'd help out at the disco tonight. Let's shift."

He gave the ignition key a wrench. The starter whirred, without result. Repeated attempts ended in failure. Finally the battery signaled exhaustion. Geoff swore.

"This sodding rain. Leads must be drenched." Opening the door, he climbed out and raised the bonnet.

Felicity sat up. The sense of melancholy was creeping back. To take her mind off it, she exposed the visor-mirror and used it in patting her hair into place, then found her lipstick. While applying some, she spotted the jacket on the rear seat. She called out, "Don't get wet!"

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Half buried in the engine, Geoff failed to hear. Retrieving the jacket, she was about to get out of the car with it when the extreme bulkiness of one of the zip-pockets proclaimed itself to her knuckles. She frowned. At this rate, the entire cut of the garment would be distorted. Unzipping the pocket, she inserted her fingers.

Out came a bundle of banknotes, doubled inside an elastic band.

A clink of metal from the front of the Mini jerked her back to an awareness of her surroundings. How long had she sat there, staring out unseeingly at the saturated gorse? The cramp in her limbs rivaled that in her brain. Fumbling open the door, she crawled out onto the squelching turf. At her approach, Geoff glanced up. Rat-tailed hair hung about his eyes. He said brusquely, "Get back in, you little idiot. No sense two of us getting soaked."

She held up the bundle. "Did you get this from him?"

Under the moisture, his face turned a dull red. "You been snooping in my belongings?"

"*Your* belongings? There must be a couple of thousand quid here. Where did it come from, Geoffrey?"

"Sold some disco gear." Snatching the bundle, he pocketed it in his trousers. "I was keeping it as a surprise."

"What gear? You don't have any. You got it from *him*. I'm right, aren't I?"

"If you say so." A sneer disfigured his voice. "Never wrong, are you? Self-righteous little tart. You and your precious Mr. Wigthorpe deserved each other, I reckon." He tugged viciously at a lead. "What have you got to complain of, anyhow? I offered you some, but you wouldn't take it. You look after your conscience, doll, I'll take care of mine."

Hunching himself once more over the engine, he added, "If you want to do something useful, how about getting back inside and see if you can start her up?"

Felicity returned to the driving seat. She felt numb. If someone had stuck a needle into her arm, she would probably have been unaware of it. Stiff-backed behind the wheel, she stared blankly down at the controls. Ignition key, throttle pedal, gearstick. Each of them meant something to her—she heard briefly Mr. Wigthorpe's quiet voice explaining their functions—but for the moment she seemed to have forgotten the routine. From the front of the car, Geoff's rain-drenched face mouthed at her through the windscreen. He was jabbing a finger. "Try it!"

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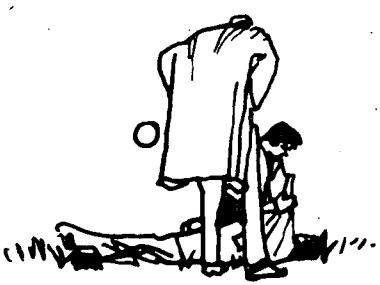
Before starting the engine, be sure the gear lever is in neutral.

She tweaked the ignition key.

The rasp of the starter motor tore at her eardrums. Simultaneously, the car gave a jerk, like a leashed dog trying to bolt after a rabbit. Feeling for the footbrake, she knew she was too late. The car had wrenched itself free. Helped by a slight downhill gradient, it leapt forward several yards before her right foot could find the brake pedal. By then the harm was done.

"Went over her boy friend like a road roller," reported the police constable who attended the incident. "Bloke never stood a chance. Poor little kid, she was practically beside herself. 'All my fault,' she kept saying over and over, 'all my fault.' Which it was, to a degree. But then he shouldn't have been standing there, should he? Criminal negligence—that's the worst they can throw at her, I reckon."



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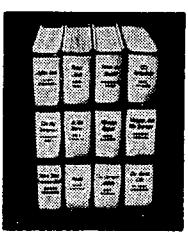

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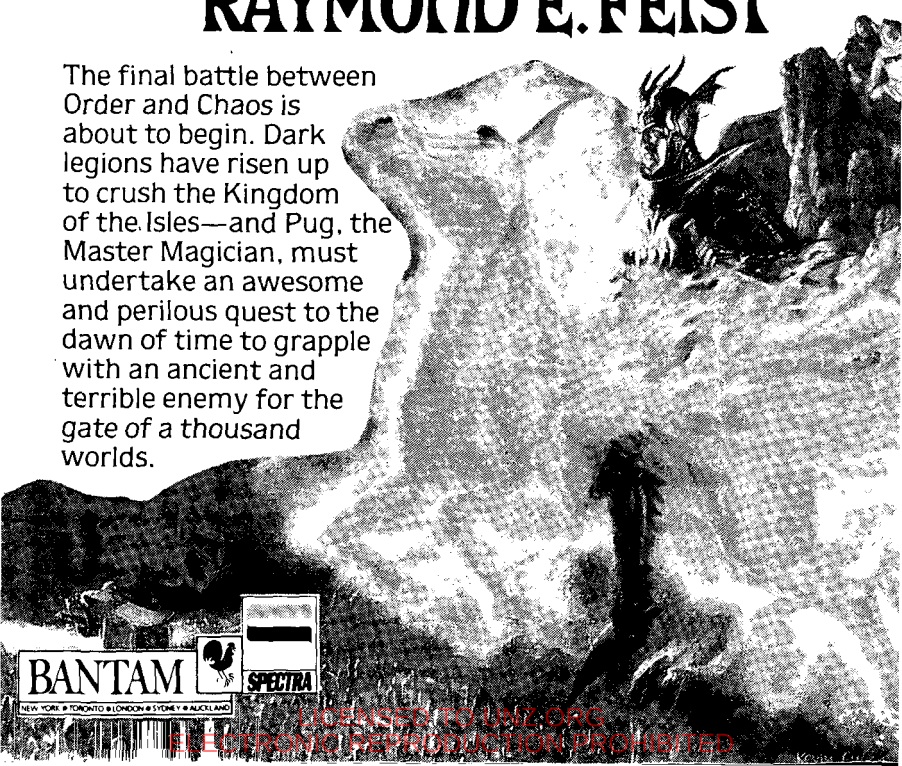

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